



LOVE ME
senseless

MONICA WALTERS

LOVE ME SENSELESS

A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK



MONICA WALTERS

Copyright © 2022 by Monica Walters

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

Introduction

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Epilogue

Afterword

Also by Monica Walters

INTRODUCTION

Hello, readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This work of art contains explicit language, lewd sex scenes, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers, including but not limited to talks of rape, abortion, miscarriage, and alcoholism.

This is book five of a new family of books... The Berotte Family (pronounced Bee-Rot). It starts with the father, and the following books trickle down to the kids. So if some things seem incomplete where the sub characters are involved, that was done intentionally. Those issues will be resolved in their books. It is highly recommended that you read the previous books of this family series before indulging in this one, because it picks up right where the last one left off.

Love On Replay

Deeper Than Love

Something You Won't Forget

I'm The Remedy

Also, please remember that your reality isn't everyone's reality. What may seem unrealistic or unrelatable to you could be very real and relatable to someone else. But also keep in mind that despite the previous statement, this is a fictional story.

Isaiah and Joyy's story is passionate, fun, and heavy all at the same time. Issues from previous stories are resolved and/or

updated, and new issues have surfaced. So I hope you enjoy the ride this story is going to take you on.

Monica

PROLOGUE



Isaiah

“I KNOW I’VE SPOKEN TO YOU ABOUT THIS BEFORE, BUT IT must be destined for us to go further than conversation. I’m trying to respect your wishes, but if you keep popping up wherever I am, I won’t be able to ignore you. Joyy, we need to stop playing games. I know you want me as badly as I want you. You can’t hide that shit. I see it whenever I’m in your presence. Stop being stubborn and let’s talk this shit out. If you follow me out of here, then I’ll know that you’re ready to be a grownup about this between us.”

I turned on my heels and left Joyy sitting on a barstool with a few of her friends. I was out with my brothers and was talking to Shy when I saw her. This was the second time I’d seen her here in Beaumont, this time at our family’s favorite bar, Pour 09. I wasn’t sure if she was back in town for good or not. She was from Beaumont like me, but we didn’t meet until we were at Howard University in DC. We’d gone to different high schools, and our paths had never crossed. If they did, we just didn’t notice one another.

I walked by my brothers and headed outside toward my car, when I heard her heels clicking on the cement. It didn’t take much for me to figure out that those steps were filled with anger. I didn’t understand how she could still be holding onto all that anger after sixteen years. We’d both matured, moved on with our lives, and possibly became totally different people.

At least I had. Back then, I was all about having fun, escaping the responsibilities of looking out for my dad and siblings. I was wilding out my first two years in college. Joyy and I were never a couple, but I fell for her. When I came to the realization of that, she was gone.

Once I got to my vehicle, I turned around to see her angry face. It was red, and her frown was deep as hell. She popped out her hip as she shifted her weight and rested her hand on it. “Let me fucking tell you something, Isaiah Dashawn Berotte. You have no idea what I went through after that miscarriage. You were there for me for two fucking weeks and assumed I should have been okay by then. You disappeared and continued with your life like I was a got damn afterthought. I know we weren’t a couple, but shit!”

The tears fell from her eyes, and she turned to walk away, clearly angry that I’d caused her emotions to really surface. I grabbed her arm, and she turned around and slapped the shit out of me. That didn’t make me let go though. I only pulled her closer. My heart had dropped to my J’s, and I realized that this was so much deeper for her.

I held her in my arms. While she wasn’t struggling to get away from me, I could feel her hesitancy about being so close to me. “I’m so sorry, Joyy. I really am. I was immature back then, and I didn’t understand the mental toll you suffered. I wanna make it right. Please let me do that. I’ve been longing for you all these years. For real. I want to be everything you need.”

She pushed away from me as I stared at her, hoping she would give me a glimmer of hope... just a slight chance to win her heart. I loved this woman. While I didn’t want to reveal that to her prematurely, I would tell her whatever she needed to know. If she needed that confirmation, I would give it to her right now. She patted the tears away and sniffed then brushed her hair away from her round face.

“It’s too late. There’s nothing you can do for me now. Just your presence brings back horrible memories that I thought I was over. I can’t do this with you, Zay.”

I grabbed her hand, pleading with my eyes. This shit was hard as hell. All these years of pining after her was for nothing. She wanted nothing more to do with me, and I would have to find a way to let go. My lip had begun to quiver slightly, so I clenched my teeth, tightening my jaw muscles. I massaged her hand with mine as I stared at it, wishing that she adorned my ring on her finger.

“All I’m asking is that you give you me a chance to make new memories, baby. That’s it. Just a chance.”

“Isaiah, when I left Howard University, I was so broken. Watching you move on after the loss of our baby was hurtful. I know you weren’t obligated to stay around. We weren’t a couple, but two weeks? I suppose you figured I should have been done with it. I wasn’t. I was hurting inside. My baby... our baby was gone. Although we were young and the timing couldn’t have been worse, I bonded immediately. Emotionally, I was a wreck. I started gaining weight that I have yet to get off, and depression had completely taken over me. Not only had I lost the baby, but I lost you too. I dealt with that the only way I knew how, and I’m still trying to recover. Now you want me to open that wound all over again.”

“I want you to open it so it can heal properly. That shit infected. Just because there’s a scab on it doesn’t mean it healed.”

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it as she stared into my eyes. She brought her other hand to my cheek, softly caressing it where she slapped it earlier, then pulled me to her. I leaned into her, lowering my face to hers. She softly kissed my lips, allowing it to linger a bit, then pulled away. It felt like it did when we were nineteen. My heart was open to her, and I didn’t know how to close it off. I could tell that she had feelings for me, but she was fighting them big time. “Bye, Zay.”

She walked away as I allowed her soft hand to slide from mine. I stared at her short, thick frame, her full, cashew-colored legs on display. The short off-the-shoulder dress she wore was so damn sexy. Even after this conversation, I still didn’t have a straightforward answer... well, not to my last

plea. Maybe I was supposed to accept her last response. She said she couldn't do this with me. I stood there until she disappeared back inside Pour 09 then got into my truck and sat there thinking about her.

Life would have to go on, no matter how painful. All the years of 'what if' would have to be gone with her. While I felt like I needed her, maybe there was another woman out there for me, and in order to find her, I would have to let go of my Joyy and try to regain it elsewhere.

CHAPTER 1



*J*saiah

Three Months Later...

“YOU HAVE OPTIONS. IT’S ONE THING TO BE SEXUALLY promiscuous, but it’s another to be ignorant. There is no reason any of you should come here with STDs or being pregnant unless you want it. We provide you with all the free condoms your soul desires and pay for other forms of birth control through a physician. There’s no excuse.”

“Dang, Mr. Berotte. You on our ass today. What’s wrong with you?” one of the girls asked.

“Three young ladies have come in here crying today because they’re pregnant. That irritates me. None of them claimed to be raped. What am I here for? I know all this stuff already. Why am I providing y’all all this knowledge... free game... if y’all won’t even take heed to it? Some nappy headed boy tell y’all that you’re beautiful, and you’re spreading your legs for him. I thought I taught y’all better than that. I used to be a nappy headed lil boy. I know what they say, ’cause I used to say the same sh—stuff.”

The young ladies giggled at my almost slip of the tongue. It was tough being a counselor these days. I was getting beyond tired of talking to at-risk teenage girls who didn’t listen. I was beginning to doubt that this was my calling. I didn’t know what my calling could be besides what I was doing, but I felt so unfulfilled lately. After working a full day, I

only had the energy to go to the gym and go home. My brothers had been trying to get me out of the house, especially Chad, but I just wasn't feeling up to it. I probably needed counseling myself.

The only time I got out was for Sunday dinner at my parents' house... Dad and Mama Nissa's house. The house once belonged to my mother, Marie Berotte. Although I was nearly ten when she died, I still remembered everything about her. I wanted to believe she was my guardian angel now. The day she went into labor with Alexz, she kissed my cheek and promised to see us later as they left us with a neighbor. The next time I saw her, she was lying in her casket. That was a traumatic time for all of us. Dylan and Shyrón cried constantly for what seemed like months.

As the girls talked amongst themselves, I began packing my things. The class was over and so was my rant. I was probably in need of a vacation. I needed a reset. I hadn't taken a vacation since the summer of last year, and I was beyond overdue. Thankfully, our time carried over from year to year, so I didn't lose any. However, today was Friday, and I was ready to get out of here, even if for nothing more than to work out and be alone. My body was craving a swim, but it was too chilly outside for that.

When I slung my bag over my shoulders, one of the young ladies asked, "You good, Mr. Berotte?"

"Yeah. We're done for today. Y'all have a good weekend."

I opened the door and watched them file out one by one. I only counseled them on Fridays. We had a special program set up with the school for them to come from two to three. Once I was done with them, I went home. I was happy about that too. It gave me an early day on Fridays. Before I could get to my truck, Shy was calling me. Opting to wait until I got inside my vehicle to answer, I silenced it and continued to my truck. He was probably calling to see what was up for the weekend. Last weekend, it was Chad, and the weekend before that, Dylan.

They'd all been trying to get me out and about. I believed I was ready. Not only was I stressed about my job, but I needed

to get Joyy out of my system. Had I not been so sure we could rekindle something, I wouldn't have been as hurt when we didn't. She was adamant in her decision to move on in her life, without me, although her mannerisms were saying differently. I could tell she felt something for me. After all these years, no other woman I met compared to her. I hated I was too immature to handle a relationship with her back then. We could have been married with a family by now.

I was happy with the man I was today. I knew I was a good man and would be a great husband and father, just like my dad, but I was losing patience with the process. I was nearing thirty-six years old, and for ten of those years, I'd been actively searching for my one. Joyy was my one. I knew she was without a doubt. That was why it had been so hard for me to move on. If only she could see, I was the man to make everything right in her life. I'd purchased a house six years ago, my credit was straight, and I gave up the ho life long ago. Maybe my downfall was that I was trying to be perfect.

I wanted to be everything I thought the right woman needed: considerate, understanding, kind, affectionate, loving, and patient. It was why Shyrón often accused me of being soft... until I had to yank Chanell out of that car. I knew how to be aggressive when I needed to be. It was just rare that I needed to be. However, every fiber of my being was telling me I would have to be that way soon. While part of me was saying to get Joyy out of my system, my heart was telling me not to give up. Something was going on with her. She seemed to be struggling with something the last time I saw her. I wanted to believe it was depression, but I wasn't sure. She just didn't look happy, even before I made my presence known.

Once inside my truck, I started my engine then called Shy back. When he answered, he didn't speak. He simply began with, "What you wanna do with this footage? It's been three months. If you ain't gon' do nothing with it, then Ali gon' delete that shit."

"Send it to me, man. I'll look at it later."

"A'ight. So you coming kick it with us tonight at Pour 09?"

“I don’t know. I might. I need to.”

“You do. It wouldn’t hurt. I need my big brother back.”

I smiled slightly as I pulled off the parking lot. Sometimes I felt like I was just the person they came to when they needed a voice of reason. Outside of that, I was lonely as hell. Chad had DJ and whatever woman he chose to be with at the time, Dylan had Skyler, Shy now had Brittany, Dad had Anissa, and Alexz had Axton, whom she would be marrying next month. Who did I have?

Even growing up, Shy looked up to Chad, and Dylan looked up to Shy. I was like their second father. I was never really the one they called to just hang out with.

I had friends when I was in school at Howard, but once I stopped hanging out as much, they moved on, letting me know they weren’t really friends to begin with.

Clearing myself of my woe is me thoughts, I said, “I never left, man. I’m just changing a bit. Those changes have me a little withdrawn right now, but I’m good. I’ll see y’all tonight.”

“A’ight. I’ll have Ali send those files to your email. Let me know how it goes.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call and hoped I would be able to handle what I saw. I promised myself that whenever I chose to look at them, I would just report it to CPS. Although I couldn’t let them know I had them under surveillance, I would have to make a convincing argument. J’Niya always looked uptight. I knew it was because of her mother’s overbearing disposition. Once, the boyfriend was with them, and I could see the way he looked at J’Niya when he thought no one was watching. It would be my word against theirs.

Plus, I would have to go to my supervisor about it before I could even report it. *If I could see it, why couldn’t anyone else?* These were times that made me somewhat hate my job. There were so many politics involved. I felt like my supervisor was only in that position because of who he knew. He didn’t have a degree in social work, health administration, or any

related field of study. His degree was in business administration. I was confused as to how that would help any of these people coming through here.

By the time I got home, I just wanted to take a nap. It seemed like I was filled with negativity, and I needed to sleep that shit off. After taking a shower and getting comfortable in my recliner, the doorbell rang. I huffed loudly and got up to see who it was. When I peeped through the peephole, I saw Alexz's big, hopeful eyes. She was definitely Marie Berotte incarnated, attitude and everything. I smiled slightly then opened the door to see she had a covered dish in her hand.

“What’s up, sis? What’chu doing over here?”

“Umm... I didn’t think I needed an invite to come see my big brother. Besides, I made something just for you.”

“Come in. You know you don’t need an invite.”

She walked in, and I closed the door behind her and followed her to the kitchen. She set the dish on the table then turned to me with a big smile. I couldn’t help but smile back. It was like Mama was here through her. Mama had more meat on her bones, but their faces and hair looked almost exactly the same. “So I know the Berotte staple desserts are lemon cake and banana pudding, but I also know that you have another favorite.”

“I know you didn’t bring a cheesecake up in here.”

She shrugged her shoulders and said, “Only one way to find out.”

I quickly pulled the lid and foil off the dish to see exactly that—a personal sized strawberry cheesecake. “Damn. This looks really good. Thanks, Alexz. What’s the occasion?”

“I don’t want you to think that I don’t think about your well-being. I love you, and I can see that you aren’t totally happy, Zay. If anybody watched you long enough, they’d be able to see it too.”

I lowered my head for a moment then gave Alexz a quick smile. I supposed my thoughts from earlier about them not noticing me were wrong. Maybe God sent her here to prove to

me they really cared and paid closer attention to me than I thought. When I didn't verbally respond to what she said, she continued.

"I really think you should open your own office. You are so above that piss poor health department. You are their biggest asset, and the muthafuckas so full of themselves they can't see that. A young girl came to the office with her mother, and when she saw my last name, she asked if I knew you. She bragged on you so much. She said she hated that you weren't her counselor, because you gave the best advice. I was so proud in that moment, because she said everything I already knew about you."

I gave Alexz a tight smile. "Thanks, sis. I've thought about it a few times. It would be nice to be my own boss. I'm getting a little fed up with the shit, honestly."

I pulled her in my arms and squeezed her tightly, lifting her from her feet as she screamed with laughter. I chuckled as I set her back on her feet. When she was little, I used to do that to her all the time. Now that she was a grown woman, she still responded the exact same way. It made my soul happy. "I love you too, Alexz with a Z. Thank you again."

"So what are your plans today?" she asked as she took a seat at the table.

"Well, I was going to take a nap, but now I have cheesecake to demolish. I'm supposed to be going out with the guys later. I'm just not really into going out much anymore. I would much rather party at the crib."

She frowned slightly. "That's cool. Why don't you tell them that?"

"I know they like going to Pour, so I can tough it out for a while. I usually enjoy myself regardless." I lowered my head then went to get a fork. The last time I went to Pour, I ran into Joyy, and I knew that every time I would go there thoughts of her would take over my mental. "You want some cheesecake?"

"No. This is all yours. I made one for me and Axton. It's in the fridge, cooling. I really admire you, Zay, but I need you to

put yourself first sometimes. When it comes to us, you always put us first. We're all grown, bruh. Be good to yourself."

I gave her a slight smile as I sat at the table and dipped my fork into that cheesecake. When I brought it to my mouth, I closed my eyes and moaned. I hadn't had a good cheesecake in months, and Alexz had perfected the recipe. She was always good at making desserts... just like Mama. "Maaaaan, this is so good."

She giggled and wiggled in her seat. "Thank you! I'm glad you like it." She stood from her seat and pushed in her chair. I supposed she only wanted to stay long enough to see my reaction to how it tasted. "I'm gonna go so you can get that nap in. Remember what I said."

I smiled slightly. I was never great at discussing my issues with my siblings. I'd just become more vocal to help them through their bullshit. Dad had always been my sounding board, but since he remarried, I'd been more reclusive. The last thing I wanted to do was bother him with my issues. So I would talk to my damn self, do breathing techniques, and get deep tissue massages. That was how I relieved my stress and decompressed.

As I followed her to the door, I said, "I take care of myself, sis. Don't worry. All you need to be worried about is this extravagant wedding next month. If you need help with anything, let me know. I don't mind."

"Thanks, Zay. I'll keep that in mind. See you Sunday."

"A'ight."

I kissed her cheek as she turned around and hugged me. After watching her leave, I closed the door and went back to my cheesecake. She was right on time with that. That damn cheesecake had me all happy and shit. Her words of encouragement contradicted my previous thoughts, and I was grateful for that. God always pulled me out of my negativity, and I appreciated Him for always stepping in right on time.

I'd been praying He would also bring Joyy back or take her away from me. I knew His timing wasn't our timing, but I

just wished something would happen soon. She was still on my mind and in almost every thought. Even after three months since our last conversation, I couldn't stop thinking about her, hoping she was doing okay.

Once I was done eating, I went back to my recliner, turned on the TV, and kicked back. That cheesecake would usher me right on in to Lalaland.

CHAPTER 2



Joyy

“HEY, JOYY. SORRY I MISSED YOUR CALL. I WAS WORKING OUT. You good? I’ll be over there after I shower so we can call your parents.”

“Hey, Isaiah.”

He was quiet for a moment, then he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I had to go to the doctor this morning. I lost the baby.”

The wail that left me had been brewing since I’d gotten back to my dorm room. While I was a little upset when I found out I was pregnant a month ago, I’d gotten attached to the baby and the thought that Isaiah and I would be a family. He wasn’t my boyfriend, but he was a great guy. I was so in love with him, but he’d never expressed an interest in being tied down to just me until we found out that we were having a baby.

“Damn. I’m so sorry. I’m gonna go take a shower, then I’ll be on my way. Don’t worry. We’ll get through this.”

Despite his words, I could hear a tinge of relief in his tone. We were only in the first semester of our sophomore year. The timing was off, but I was prepared to do whatever I had to do to take care of our baby and still go to school. I ended the call without saying goodbye then curled up in the fetal position. When I woke up this morning, cramping and full of blood, I knew something was terribly wrong. I called the doctor’s

office, and they told me to come in. I'd called Isaiah as soon as I'd gotten out of the shower and again when I got to the doctor's office.

I'd endured that moment alone, because I didn't want to wake my roommate. She'd had a late night. Within fifteen minutes, there was a knock on the door. I slowly got up and headed to the door. When I saw it was Zay, I opened it. He quickly walked in and scooped me up in his strong arms, kissing me repeatedly as he held me close. I loved his sensitivity, and it was needed now more than ever.

"I'm so sorry, baby."

He took me to my bed and laid me in it then climbed in behind me and held me in his arms. I closed my eyes as the tears continued to cascade down my cheeks. "I got'chu, Joyy. I'm here for you, baby girl."

"Joyy!"

My eyes opened slowly as I gripped my head. I had a headache from hell, and Seneca was banging on my bedroom door. I hated when he came to town and crashed at my place. He never let me wallow in my feelings. Could have sworn he was my big brother instead of my younger brother. I was nearly four years older than him and had practically raised him while our mother worked her ass off to provide our necessities.

I peeled myself from the bed and grabbed my housecoat, sliding it on over my half naked body. My eyes felt big as fucking golf balls, and I just wanted to go back to sleep. When I opened the door, he frowned. "Man, come on na. It's eleven a.m., and you look like shit. What time did you go to sleep?"

"I didn't think that was any of your business. Keep it down. I have a headache."

"I ain't keeping shit down! You have a hangover. Big difference. I'm so sick of that shit. Whenever you get in your fucking feelings, you think you have to drink that shit away. You a functioning alcoholic."

"Fuck you. I'm not. I don't drink every day... only on the weekends."

“Drinking is one thing, but yo’ ass be getting pissy ass drunk. That’s a fucking problem. Don’t make me move here permanently. You know I will. This shit been going on for years and one day, you gon’ kill your fucking self. Mama told me to come check on your ass because night before last, you called her talking all kinds of bullshit about a baby and that nigga you used to be in love with. If you still having issues with that shit, you need to go see a fucking counselor. It’s been, what? Fifteen years?”

I walked away from the door and crawled back in my bed, only for him to pull me from it. When I burst into tears, Seneca pulled me in his arms and held me. “I’m just worried about you, Joyy. This shit ain’t healthy. That nigga probably done moved on with his life and living it to the fullest, but you stuck in the past.”

“No, he hasn’t. I was doing fine until about five or six months ago. I was over all that and living my life. When I came back to Beaumont, things took a turn. He found me on Facebook and wanted to meet up and talk. After declining his advances, I saw him again three months ago, and he practically begged me to be in his life.”

He pulled away from me with a frown. “You obviously still love the man. What’s the damn problem?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I have my reasons,” I said as I flopped back to my bed.

I slowly shook my head. Seneca didn’t know about the miscarriage. He just thought that I was in love with a nigga that didn’t love me back. Well, technically, I was. When I came back home from Howard, I took the spring semester to myself then ended up at Florida State the following fall semester. I practically denounced my sorority, Zeta Phi Beta, because it reminded me of Zay. He was a Sigma, and we’d met when I was crossing over. My mama had since moved to Houston with Seneca, so I didn’t know why I let a job bring me back to Beaumont. Had I not come back, I would’ve never run into Isaiah.

He still looked amazing, while I'd gained weight in my depression. I knew I still looked good, but I didn't feel good. That was where the disconnect came in. I knew that I was never over what had happened sixteen years ago, but I was able to put it to the back of my mind until Zay contacted me. All the feelings of inadequacy and depression came back like a tsunami and took me down. Seeing him had taken a toll on me. While I wanted to accept him back into my life, I felt like I wouldn't be able to handle it. I realized that I still hadn't forgiven him for turning his back on me.

Two weeks after my miscarriage, he was in the wind, partying like I didn't exist. My calls would go unanswered, text messages unread, and I felt so alone. He didn't want to be bothered with me anymore, and that hurt like hell. I loved him so much, and I never told him. It was probably best that I didn't. It would have only crushed me more for him to say that he didn't feel the same way. I felt like the guilt of what he did to me was finally eating him alive. My love for him came barreling back in my life just like my hurt feelings and depression, and I didn't know what to do with that.

I couldn't be with him simply because he felt guilty. Once he felt like he'd made up for his horrible decision, he would be gone again. I wouldn't be able to take that. I'd been dreaming of him nearly every night, and I knew that Seneca was right. I needed to talk to someone to help me get through my feelings. The ironic part was that I saw he was now a counselor and advocate at the health department, helping young people through some of the same shit we went through—teenaged pregnancies and prevention.

“You may not want to talk to me about it, but you ain't finna mope around here either. Get dressed so we can go to lunch somewhere.”

I slightly rolled my eyes. The last thing I felt like doing was getting out and about. Sundays were for relaxing and getting over my hangovers.

He walked out of my room and slammed the door, then yelled, “You got twenty minutes!”

I went to my nightstand drawer, pulled out a bottle of Tylenol, and took a few of them. I wouldn't be fit for shit tomorrow at work. The school administration building was bleak and depressive in itself. My inner turmoil would only make that worse. I enjoyed working in administration when I was in Atascocita. I should have stayed my ass there. The superintendent, who was now my friend, Kaysyn, had a handle on things and had that district running like a well-oiled machine. Everyone there just seemed so happy.

Here, it was like people were always talking negatively about the next person. It made the work experience feel like torture. I often kept up with my former coworkers through Kaysyn by phone conversation. Her family had become my family as well. When she told me Axton was getting married, I couldn't believe it. He and Arrow were huge playboys. Arrow used to flirt with me all the time. Me being nearly five years older than him didn't even matter. I couldn't wait to attend the wedding. I never asked what the bride's name was, but I was almost sure she had to be a hell of a woman to tame Ax's cocky ass.

I stood from the bed and made my way to the shower so Seneca could calm his ass down. I knew he would be leaving to go home later, and I couldn't wait. While I knew he was right, I didn't need him yelling at me, making me feel worse. He had a business to run, and he needed to be concentrating on that instead of what I was doing. Since he'd left the street life behind, he wanted to make me believe he just had shit together and had life all figured out. I guess I would, too, if I had plenty of drug money to start my own business.

He had an embroidery shop that was doing well, because he had a lot of connections. Half of them were probably former customers of his from his past life. However, I never judged him or fussed at him like he was doing to me. When I found out how deep he was into that shit, I mentioned my concerns once or twice, then I left it alone. Now he wanted to walk around here like he was my nonexistent father, telling me what I needed to be doing.

After my shower and getting dressed, I pulled my coat from the hanger and made my way to the front room to find him sitting there playing on his phone. He looked up at me and smiled, flashing his grill. He stood and handed me a bottle of cold water. *Thank God.* I felt like I wanted to throw up, so hopefully it would calm that down. I unscrewed it and guzzled it.

“Now come on so you can get some food in your system. Eggs help with hangovers, so maybe we can find a brunch to go to.”

“Eggs?” I asked after swallowing my water.

“That’s what I heard. We about to find out though. Then you can come back home and rest up for tomorrow.”

“Okay. Let’s go so we can get back.”

I slid on my coat then guzzled the rest of my water and followed him out. After I locked the door, he grabbed my hand and led me to his car. “You know I’m just worried about you, Jovy. That’s it. I hate to see you depressed and drinking your life away. You used to be so happy. I miss that version of you. You haven’t been the same since you came back from Howard. Whatever that nigga did must’ve been pretty bad. Does Mama know?”

“Yeah.”

“Well damn. I guess I don’t mean shit to you since I don’t know.”

“Don’t do that, Sen. It was best that you didn’t know at the time. Part of what we went through was my fault for not communicating like I should. He wasn’t a mind reader. I just thought my actions said it all. We were both immature, and it was probably best things happened the way they did.”

As he opened the door for me, he said, “Well, I don’t see why y’all can’t work it out if both of you are miserable without each other. He must be one of them soft ass, sensitive niggas.”

I rolled my eyes as he closed the door. That was why I didn’t tell him shit. Isaiah was sensitive at times, but I loved

that about him. He wasn't that way around his friends, but knowing he could be that way with me was one of the reasons I fell in love with him.

When Sen got in the car, I turned to him. "Isaiah was a good person. I won't let you talk about him that way. I'm the only one that can feel a way about him. You don't know him."

"You still love him. I don't know why you torturing yourself. It's stupid as hell."

He started the car and headed out of the apartment complex. I chose to ignore him although I knew he was right... yet again. "Where are we going?"

"Waffle House."

Some kind of brunch. I sat back in my seat and briefly thought about contacting Isaiah but decided against it. If we ran into one another again, maybe I would entertain whatever he had to say. Running into him again would possibly prove it was meant for us to be together. Three times was the charm, or at least that was what people said. Our child would have been fifteen years old by now. Surely, I should be able to handle talking to him about my trauma without screaming at him and getting angry. He seemed like he was really sorry about what happened. Isaiah had never sold me any falsehoods. He wasn't a liar. I knew he meant what he said.

For this moment to come back around and present itself, it had to be real. I didn't give him time to talk about his feelings much at all. Maybe he could enlighten me on some things... tell me what made him want to even contact me in the first place. I wanted to believe that it was guilt, but it had to be more. He apologized, and I'd accepted his apology, but that didn't seem to be enough for him. He wanted to be in my life and have me in his. He seemed to regret his decision to push me away, but I needed more of an explanation.

When Seneca pulled into the parking lot at Waffle House, I took a deep breath, doing my best to keep the nausea at bay. Thankfully, it was cold outside. That helped tremendously. Before I could get out of the car, my phone was ringing. When

I saw Kaysyn's number, I smiled. Whenever I thought of her, she always called. That shit was weird.

"Hello?"

"Hey, girl! How are you?"

"I'm better now. What are you up to?"

"Not too much. I was wondering if you would be busy next weekend," Kaysyn inquired.

"No, not really. What's up?"

"I'll be in Beaumont. My mama and I have to make some last-minute plans for Alexz's bridal shower. I would love for you to attend. We're having the shower the weekend after, then the wedding will be two weeks from then."

"Sounds like a plan. I need friends out here. My coworkers are pathetic, and most of my friends from high school have gotten the hell out of here. Her name is Alexz?"

"Yes. Her nickname is Alexz with a Z. Her name is Alexandria, and she spells it with a Z. It's cute. She's younger than Ax—only about twenty-six or so. She's really sweet though. You would like her."

"Aww, okay. I can't wait to meet her and to see you and Mama Shirl. I'll call you later though. I'm going to eat with Seneca."

"Oh, okay. Tell my boyfriend number two I said hey."

I rolled my eyes. She used to always say that if Seneca were older, he would have had her, hook line and sinker. She loved his dark skin and his athletic build. He was a good football player in high school and could have probably gone to college and played, but he was too caught up in street shit to worry about college. She would say all the time that if she wasn't married, she would give him all her cougar vibes.

I glanced at Seneca as he grinned. I knew he'd heard her. He confirmed that when he said, "Tell Kaysyn to quit fucking with me before I have her in positions she only dreamed about."

“Y’all are making me more nauseous. I’m sure you heard him.”

“Mm hmm. He better be glad Luckey makes me happy, or I would show him that I execute all my dreams.”

“Bye, slut,” I said and hung up on her before she went too far.

Seneca would be saying all kinds of uncomfortable shit. He glanced at me as he chuckled. “Your friend gon’ get handled—married or not.”

“If I roll my eyes one more time, that shit gon’ get stuck. Come on so I can get back home.”

CHAPTER 3



Isaiah

WHEN I GOT TO AXTON AND ALEXZ'S HOUSE, SHE WAS running around like she was in a hurry. "Where you going?"

"Kaysyn and Mama Shirl are coming to get me. We have to go and make sure the hall is a go for next weekend and check on a few other things. Mama Shirl and Mama Nissa wanted me to have a bridal shower. They said the bachelorette party would be too much for them."

She giggled, and I couldn't help but smirk as I thought about their faces at her twenty-fifth birthday party when Axton, Chad, DJ, and their bruhs stepped to that nasty ass song. When those niggas said, *fuck that ho meat to meat*, I thought Mama Nissa was gon' pass out. She got stiff as a damn board. That shit was funny as hell, although I was shocked they played that song in front of them. Niggas had no respect for their elders. Dad was cool with shit like that, because he knew us like no one else, but I wouldn't have dared played no shit like that.

"Where's Ax?"

"He's in the back. Arrow, Mr. Vaughn, and Daddy are back there too. Kaysyn, Mama Shirl, and Mama Nissa went to pick up Kaysyn's friend, then they're coming back to get me since I wasn't ready."

"Okay. Cool."

I was tired of being cooped up in my house, so I'd decided to pay my sister and soon-to-be brother-in-law a visit. I knew Dad would be chilling over here today as well. Dylan and Skyler were out of town. She had a case in San Antonio Monday, so they'd dug out this morning. Shy had gone, too, so I was more than sure Brittany would be going with the ladies to wherever they were going. Kaysyn had a nice sized SUV that could hold six passengers.

Before I could make my way to the back, Brittany walked through the door, proving my assumption to be correct. She smiled as she came to hug me.

“Hey, Zay! How are you?”

“Hey, Britt. I'm good. What about you?”

“I'm okay. Missing my man already and he just left. If I could, I would have taken off and went with him like Dylan did with Skyler. I want to save time for whenever we get married. My parents are wanting to give me a wedding. I couldn't care less. We could do like Skyler and Dylan. I'm not that close to anybody but y'all.”

I wasn't sure why she was telling me all that until the door opened and Kaysyn walked in. The Lord was stalling me, because the beautiful woman that walked in behind her took my breath away. I stood as still as a statue as I stared at her. When her eyes met mine, she became just as still. The room became quiet, and I could imagine that everyone was staring at us and the way we'd fallen into a trance. I couldn't look away from her until she looked away from me.

“I take it y'all know each other,” Alexz said.

I didn't say a word, and neither did Joyy.

Kaysyn spoke up and said, “Umm, Joyy, this is Alexz, Axton's fiancée. That's her brother, Isaiah, but I feel like you know that already.”

I was stuck. God had brought her back to me. I prayed He would bring her back, and He did. I just hoped He didn't bring her back for me to get closure or for her to play games with me. I stepped closer to her, hoping she would be receptive to

my efforts this time. She didn't back away, so that was a good sign. When I extended my hand, she hesitantly placed hers in mine. I closed my eyes and licked my lips, trying to process just what her touch did to me.

I slowly pulled her to me and held her in my embrace. When she rested her head on my chest, I felt like all was right in my world now. My soul was light, and I didn't even know whether she would be mine or not. I kissed the top of her head then opened my eyes to see Alexz staring at me wide-eyed. Soon after, the tears fell from her eyes, and she led Brittany and Kaysyn out of the door, leaving Joyy with me.

I didn't know if anyone had told Alexz about Joyy, but she seemed to know something. The slight smile on Brittany's face indicated she did as well. Shyrón had probably been running his mouth. When Joyy pulled away from me, she looked around and realized they'd left her inside with me.

She looked back at me and said, "Hi, Isaiah."

"Hey."

I grabbed her hand and led her to the couch in the front room, not even attempting to go outside with the men. This was the moment I'd been craving, and I was on pins and needles, waiting to see what she would do. I was anticipating what she would say and how she would say it. Once she sat, I sat next to her. We continued staring at one another until the tears fell from her eyes.

She cleared her throat and said, "I told myself that if I ever saw you again, that we would talk like adults, and I would let you explain what happened. That I would hear you out and ask questions. I just made myself that promise last weekend, and here we are. Wow."

I gently caressed her hand with mine as I swallowed hard. Lifting it to my lips, I kissed it then watched her skin redden some. She was a badass yellow bone. She'd thickened up over the years, and I loved every pound she'd added. Damn, she was fine as hell. The way she had her hair braided into two French braids, she looked like an Indian doll. All she needed was a head dress.

I stared into her doe like eyes and said, “I prayed that you would come back to me. I’ve been thinking about you for the past sixteen years, Joyy, wishing I had done things differently.”

Her eyes widened, then she dropped her gaze to our hands. “Why did you let me go?”

I closed my eyes as I allowed my mind to go back to 2006 at Howard University. I was a sophomore football player, playing the field in my love life as well. “I was immature back then, thinking that I wanted to play the field. I knew that you had feelings for me back then, but I thought if I didn’t acknowledge them, then I could pretend that I didn’t know. I thought I wanted to be single and be able to do all the things I couldn’t do at home. When I came home for that Christmas break, I felt horrible about it. I couldn’t even enjoy my family the way I normally did. I made a vow that when we got back that spring semester, I would make things right with you and make you mine.”

“But I didn’t go back,” she mumbled. “I changed my number too.”

“Yeah. I tried calling you every day for a while until it finally said the number was no longer in service. For the longest, it went straight to voicemail. I’ve been searching for someone like you ever since, and I haven’t been successful. I feel like that’s because there’s only one Joyy Michelle Roberts.”

I gently slid my hand to her cheek and caressed it with my thumb, wiping her tears away. “Where did you go?”

“I stayed home for a semester, then I went to Florida State and majored in education and got a master’s in curriculum administration. My mama and brother moved to Houston, so once I graduated, I went there and ended up working in Atascocita, where I met Kaysyn. I got a better position as a curriculum coordinator here this school year, but I hate it. I’ve been somewhat of a loner, only going out for drinks here and there.”

“When I stopped talking to you,” I started then stopped. I couldn’t even verbalize how stupid I had been. “I hurt you, and that hurt me. It was like I was trying to be someone I’m not and have never been. I’m so sorry. But this isn’t a guilt trip. I’ve been missing you for years, Joyy, wishing that I would have made you mine.”

The tears kept falling from her eyes. The way I’d hurt this woman was doing things to my mental that I just couldn’t shake. It had been sixteen years, and she was still suffering from what I did. She stared into my eyes and said, “Sometimes I still think about our baby. He or she would have been fifteen years old by now. I often wonder if it was something I did that caused me to lose it. I go through my actions in my mind after I found out about my pregnancy, trying to figure out if a particular incident caused it, knowing that I didn’t do anything wrong. Had I had the baby, I would have still had you as well.”

Damn. I pulled her in my arms again and whispered, “Fuck.” My heart was bleeding as I listened to her sobs. “I didn’t realize how much hurt I was causing you. I broke your heart, and I’m going to try my hardest... do my best to mend it.”

She pulled away from me and wiped her face. “I didn’t realize how therapeutic it would be to talk to you. I feel like a weight has lifted from me.”

I frowned slightly, trying to anticipate where she was going with that revelation. She scooted away some as she continued. “I can’t say whether I will ever be yours, Zay, but I’m willing to keep the line of communication open.”

I released the breath I was holding and nodded. As long as she would continue talking to me, I could handle the rest. The rest of my days would be dedicated to showing her how much I loved her and just how much we needed one another.

“Thank you, Joyy. I hope we can make it through the rest of our lives together though. I’m willing to do that on your terms and however you want to go about it, but I can’t say that I’m not going to try to persuade you to consider my way.”

I lowered my forehead to hers and brought my hands to both sides of her head. “Maaan, you don’t know how much I’ve missed you and wanted this moment to happen. Thank you. I won’t break your heart again. I promise. It’ll be safe with me if you ever decide to open it up to me again.”

She pulled away slightly to look into my eyes again. I wanted to kiss her so badly, but I didn’t want to be too pushy. She brought her hand to my face and stroked my cheek. “I used to be in love with you.”

I knew that much. That was why I was so tormented that I practically threw her away. “I hope you’ll fall again. I’ll catch you this time.”

She lowered her gaze and took a deep breath, causing a tremble to go throughout her body. When she looked back up at me, she asked, “So what now? Kaysyn’s ass left me.”

I smiled at her. “You wanna go outside and meet my dad? Axton, Arrow, and Mr. Vaughn are out there with him.”

She hesitated but said, “Yeah. Sure.”

I stood then helped her from her seat and led her to the back door. Although I didn’t want to let her hand go, I did as she walked out of the door. The moment she did, Axton yelled, “Joyy! What’s going on?”

My dad looked up, and his eyes widened. I nodded, answering his silent question. I had no idea she was connected to Axton and his family, but I was grateful she was. After she greeted the three of them, I gently pulled her to my dad.

“Joyy, this is my father, Sheldon Berotte. Dad, this is Joyy Roberts.”

He stood from his seat and gently shook her outstretched hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Joyy,” he said as he glanced at me.

I couldn’t stop the smile that spread on my lips as she said, “It’s really nice to meet you too, Mr. Berotte.”

She looked back up at me, so I asked, “You wanna go for a ride?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

I smiled at her then said, “We’ll be back, y’all.”

“Yo, how y’all know each other?” Arrow asked.

I glanced at her to see her redden some then said, “We went to Howard together.”

“Oh, okay. Cool.” I was glad he let it go with that. I supposed that was enough of an explanation for him.

I led Joyy back through the house so she could get her purse, then we went out of the front door to get to my truck. “You know, when I saw this truck, I had a feeling you were here. I thought I was tripping and tried to put it out of my mind, until I walked in. Kaysyn didn’t tell me that Alexz’s last name was Berotte, and I never asked what her last name was.”

“Would you have still come if you knew?” I asked as I opened the door for her.

She stood in front of me and looked up at me. “I think so. Since the last time I saw you... you’ve been on my mind heavily, causing me to wish I would have asked more questions. So if for nothing more, I knew I needed to see you to get closure.”

I nodded as she got in and closed her door. *Closure my ass.* She was going to be mine. There was nothing she’d be able to do to stop destiny. I couldn’t wait to introduce her to the rest of the family as my woman. If I had my way, that moment would be coming soon as hell. However, I knew I couldn’t rush her. I knew she was depressed. She cared for me more than she was trying to let on. She still loved me, and I knew it when I pulled her in my arms. I could feel it, but I could also smell the faint scent of alcohol on her.

I sensed it at the club three months ago. She was drinking a lot to handle the depression. That was something my rejection caused, and I’d be damned if I would leave her again. She’d have to damn near disappear to get rid of me now. I was going to do everything within my power to help her get back on track. If this wasn’t motivation to start my own practice, I

didn't know what was. I was a licensed counselor, and I had the knowledge to do it.

After getting in the truck with her, I backed out and drove off with no destination in mind. Even with as expensive as gas was, I would do anything just to stay in her presence. I drove in silence until she turned to me and smiled.

“You good? You need anything?” I asked her.

She shook her head then looked back out the window. “Did you come right back to Beaumont after you graduated?” she asked.

“Yeah. I enrolled at Lamar to get my master's degree in family counseling. That was thirteen years ago. I just wanted to be close to my family again. Being away wasn't all it was cracked up to be after you left. I just wanted to finish my degree and get back home. My family was all I'd really known. I mean, I had a couple of friends here and there, but it was my family that kept me going. I'd grown up always making sure they were good, especially after my mama died. They needed me, and I needed them.”

She slid her hand to mine, and I gripped it tightly, then pulled over into a gas station. I turned to her and just stared at her. I could tell I was making her uncomfortable because she'd turned slightly red again and averted her gaze. “What's wrong?” she asked without looking back at me.

“Nothing. I'm just in shock that you're here. I could stare at you all day. You're so beautiful, and despite what you say, I'm claiming you as mine. I don't want anyone else. So I'm not giving up on you for no reason. You being here makes me happy as hell.”

“Zay... so much has changed. There are some things about me that aren't so appealing anymore. I'm trying to be better. I don't think I'm fit for a relationship right now. There's so much work I have to do... on myself.”

I brought my hand to her cheek as I leaned into her. “Let me help you. I don't care what it is, Joyy. I want to be there for you.”

Her eyes watered as I leaned in closer and softly kissed her lips. It was like heaven opened its gates, welcoming me in. There was no way I would back away until she did. She withdrew her lips by lowering her head, but her forehead stayed glued to mine. Feeling her breath against my face was awakening the beast in me. Being that I was a grower and not a show-er, I didn't sport a print until I was turned on. He was revealing himself at this moment. I wanted her so badly.

Lifting her head by grabbing her chin, I said, "I don't care what I have to do. You will be mine, Joyy... all mine. Let me help you find peace. Let me *be* your peace."

Her eyes became shifty as she stared at me. When she looked away and glanced back, I knew she'd noticed my hard dick. He was impossible to hide when he was ready for action, no matter what I wore. The nigga had shown up and shown out. I pulled away from her and glanced down at my sweats.

"I'm sorry. I promise I'm not trying to pressure you into anything. It's just been a while since I've been this close to a woman... one that I'm really feeling."

She slowly turned back to me, and what I saw in her eyes reminded me of how we first fell into bed with each other. She'd looked at me the same way. Her eyes seemed to be penetrating my soul, and her eyebrows were somewhat lifted and slightly scrunched together like she wanted to beg me to take care of her. So I wasn't surprised when she said, "Take me to your place, Zay."

CHAPTER 4



Joyy

WHAT IN THE HELL ARE YOU DOING? THOSE DRINKS FROM LAST night must have still been in my system. Isaiah didn't question my request. The moment it left my lips, he pulled away and put the truck in gear to head to his home. I was so damned nervous now. I didn't want to have sex with him right now. That was how we got started last time. However, at the same time, I could already picture myself sliding down his dick like I was on a slip-n-slide. There was no water or dish soap required. I would provide all the lube.

Last night, I'd stayed home and got lit all by myself. I was so damned drunk and horny until anyone could have gotten it. I'd gotten my dildo from my nightstand drawer and fucked myself to sleep. I woke up sticky and hungover. That was normal for a Saturday. I usually used it to recoup so I could do it all over again on Saturday nights. Sundays were my lazy days. I slept for most of it, ate soup, and watched Lifetime so I could cry about my pitiful life.

I needed a drink now, because my nerves were bouncing all over my body. I could only imagine that Isaiah's dick had gotten even more lethal than it was sixteen years ago. *Lord Jesus*. I didn't stand a chance. His dick took me places I could never forget, and it seemed like no one else even knew those places existed. It was like I'd made them up. Despite my

nerves, my pussy was sopping wet, imagining all the things Zay would do to it.

Sex was another slight problem. If I couldn't have a drink, I often craved sex. It was something that took my mind off whatever was on it. I didn't know how this would go with Zay today though. A lot of times, thoughts of him and our baby were what was tormenting me. I turned to him when he stopped at the traffic light, only to find him staring at me. His gaze could set me ablaze, and it was why I tried to avoid it. I needed to take this slow, but here I was, going to his house to get fucked. My mind wanted me to treat him like he treated me all those years ago, but my heart wouldn't hear of it.

We held one another's gaze until I noticed the movement in his crotch. *He wasn't done growing?* Maybe this wasn't a good idea. I looked away from him, trying to figure out how I would tame the angry monster in his pants if I didn't take care of him.

As if sensing my conflicted thoughts, he said, "Joyy, if you're having doubts, we don't have to do this. I'm content just being in your presence. It's soon, and I don't want you to think that this is all I want from you. I refuse to allow this to be a repeat of last time."

"Drive, Isaiah," I said when I noticed the light had turned green.

I couldn't respond to what he'd said just yet, because I wasn't one hundred percent sure of what I would do. Every inch of my body wanted to feel his against it, licking it, stroking it, and caressing it. My nipples were hard as hell and craved the warmth of his mouth. I needed him to douse my fire so I could think clearly. Closing my eyes, I could feel the tingling below. Dropping my head back to the seat, I found myself imagining all the things I wanted him to do. I slid my hands between my legs and squeezed. I was going to cum on myself if I kept imagining all the things Zay could do to me.

When a slight moan left my lips, it brought me back to reality. I opened my eyes to see we were in Isaiah's driveway. When I turned to him, he was gripping his dick, and his eyes

were closed. Maybe that was why the moment was so strong. We were practically one at the moment. After clearing my throat, he opened his eyes and released his erection. Without a word, he got out of the truck and made his way around to help me out.

It didn't make sense the way his dick was stretching out those sweats. Once he opened the door and I was about to get out, he wrapped his arms around my waist and lifted me from the truck into his arms. He held me like I weighed a buck twenty-five, my weight at eighteen years old. I was nearly seventy pounds heavier than that now, but apparently, that didn't matter to him. That made me wonder if my physical appearance ever mattered to him. He was feeling the real Jooy Roberts.

That thought alone caused me to wrap my arms around his neck as he adjusted me in his arms. He cradled me like a baby and softly kissed my lips again. God, his lips were like cotton candy, and I knew I would never get enough. When he got to the back door, I thought he would put me down, but he didn't. He stooped a bit and punched in some numbers and opened the door. After walking in, he gently kicked it closed.

He nuzzled his face in my neck and placed soft kisses all over that side of it, letting me feel his tongue. He was so passionate. He always was. I think I fell in love with his gentleness. I held his head in my hands, feeling the softness of his hair. It was a little longer than he used to wear it in school, but I liked it. It was slightly disheveled, but I believed that was intentional. When he lowered me to my feet, I stared up at him. Isaiah had to be at least a foot taller than me, and I was five feet six inches.

My brother was six two, and it seemed like Isaiah would tower over him. As I stared up at him, he asked, "Do you care for anything to drink?"

"Naw," I said in a low voice.

I only wanted to drink him in all his sexiness. He'd gotten thicker over the years as well, but shit if it wasn't sexy as hell on him. His arms were defined, but he had some meat on him

too. A woman like me had no use for a skinny nigga. I slid my arms around his waist and laid my head against his chest. His heart was beating fast as hell. *Why was he nervous?* I pulled away and sat on his couch, and he did the same. When he did, I went to his lap, straddling him.

His eyes widened for a split second as I asked, “Why are you nervous?”

His hands went to my ass, and he caressed it, then suddenly smacked it. I gushed all in my panties as he stared at my chest. “I don’t want you to regret this. I don’t want to make love to you only for you to disappear on me.”

Make love? I wanted to be fucked. To hell with love. I brought my hands to his face and lifted it to where he was staring me in the eyes. “If you fuck me right, I won’t be going anywhere.”

I began rolling my hips against him, sliding up and down his erection as he bit his bottom lip. A slight moan left his lips, and his eyes closed for a moment. When he reopened them, he picked me up and sat me next to him. He pulled his shirt over his head then looked at me. “You won’t be able to handle being fucked. That pussy gotta get used to me all over again. I already know you ain’t had a nigga as blessed as me.”

Well damn. He was right, but he didn’t need to know that. I frowned slightly. “What makes you so sure?”

He smirked as he stared down at me. “Would we be here if you had?”

I frowned a little harder. “Since when did you become so cocky?”

“When did you become so forward?”

He picked up his shirt and put it back on, confusing me further. I definitely needed a drink now. When he scooted closer to me, he pulled my hand in his. “See how that felt awkward to you?” I turned to look at him. I knew what he was getting at. He continued. “That’s how this feels to me. Although I’m extremely turned on, this isn’t the you I know. So maybe we should talk more and get to know one another

before going there. I'm not as cocky as I just made you believe, but I'm a lot more confident and I guess cockier than I used to be."

I huffed loudly as he smirked.

"I'll take that drink now."

Here I was thinking I would get the fucking of my life, only to be sitting here with the damn counselor. He stood from the couch and left to get me a drink as I rolled my eyes. This had to be a huge mistake. As I sat trying to figure out what happened, my phone rang. Pulling it from my pocket, I saw Seneca's name. "Hello?"

"Hey. What'chu doing?"

"I'm out. I'm not in bed." When I saw Isaiah returning with a bottle of water, I added with a softer voice, "Nor am I drinking."

"Good. But you didn't answer the question. I asked what'chu doing, not where you at or what'chu *not* doing."

"I'm talking to a friend. Why?"

"I'm at your crib. And you were clearly drinking last night. The empty bottle of Hennessy is on the countertop. We gon' talk when you get back. I'm moving back here. Apparently, you need the guidance."

"Bye, Seneca."

I ended the call as Isaiah extended the bottle of water to me. I was ready to leave, but I had nowhere to go. This was bullshit. Seneca was invading my space for God knew how long, and Isaiah was irritating me. I wanted to text Kaysyn so bad, but I didn't want to inconvenience her. I took the water from him and opened it to guzzle it so I could calm my nerves.

When he sat next to me, he said, "Man, cool out. You're being forced to face your demons and you not liking it. I heard you talking to Seneca."

I took a deep breath and lowered my head, knowing he'd heard the conversation. They'd never met, but I'd talked about my brother to him often when we were in school. Zay lifted

my head and forced me to look at him. “I already knew, Joyy. I could smell the alcohol on you. It’s seeping from your pores. I’m going to be here for you every step of the way. This is my fault. All this shit is my fault.”

“I want to leave. Please take me to meet Kaysyn.”

He slid his hands down his face. “So you want me to fuck you and pretend the issues aren’t still there?”

“I want you here for me on my terms. Remember that shit you said? You said you would do things the way I wanted to do them! You’re already proving you’re a liar!”

He frowned hard then stood and dropped his pants and pulled his shirt off. “Fine. You wanna get fucked? We can start with that hostile ass mouth. Come choke on this shit.”

I stared at him in shock until he pulled me from the couch, causing me to fall to my knees in front of him. He squatted slightly and put the head of his dick to my lips. “Open that mouth up like you had it a minute ago, Joyy.”

Still in shock, I slowly opened my mouth, and he glided his monstrosity of a dick inside. I closed my eyes, not knowing whether he turned on in the moment or angry. Either way, I was gonna suck the hell out of his dick. Slowly, I began bobbing on it as he stroked my mouth. When he stilled, I went in, sucking his shit like it was the best licorice I’d ever tasted. Listening to his moans was bringing my state of euphoria back, and I loved every minute of it. He grabbed my hair and began guiding me on his dick, forcing me to take more of him.

I began gagging and coughing, but he didn’t let up right away. When I began retreating, he released my hair, allowing me to pull away. As I wiped the tears from my eyes, I watched him stroke his dick and listened to the noise his strokes were making since it was covered with my saliva.

“Take them clothes off.”

I didn’t waste any time. I immediately pulled off my long-sleeved shirt and stood to pull off my jeans. I shimmied out of them as he watched, his lips tucked in his mouth. He was right. I didn’t know this Isaiah, but I was eager to get to know him

more. I noticed that he could be aggressive when he was pushed to be. While I loved his gentleness, I was loving this side of him too. As he stepped closer to me, I turned my back to him and unfastened my bra then pulled my underwear off, bending completely over, giving him a peak at the prize.

He grabbed my ass and slid the head of his dick inside of me. I damn near came on him at entry. He was teasing me though, just fucking me with the head of his dick. He had to be torturing himself. When I tried to stand up to question him, he pushed me to the oversized couch and walked off. I sat there stewing in my juices, figuring he walked away to get a condom. I didn't give a fuck about a condom at this point. I trusted him. Regardless of how he'd changed, deep down, he was still the same Isaiah I knew and loved.

I lay on my back and lifted my leg to the back of the couch and began fingering myself. I couldn't take the wait. My rose vibrator would be a good thing to have with me. I'd have to start carrying that shit in my purse. I closed my eyes and toyed with one of my nipples while I enjoyed myself immensely. Before I could get too carried away, I heard Isaiah coming back. I didn't stop what I was doing. I wanted him to see me.

He stood there already strapped up, watching me for a moment then his eyes met mine. There was a sadness in them though. I slowly pulled my fingers from my pussy as I watched him make his way to me. He went to his knees on the floor and grabbed my hand, sucking every bit of juice from my fingers. The sadness in his eyes was bothering me though. Just as I was about to sit up to try to figure out what was wrong, he pushed me back down and put my leg over his shoulder. He pushed my stomach up slightly and brought his face to my treasure and spit shined it like it was his most valuable trophy.

I couldn't dare object to the tongue lashing he was giving me. Shit, he'd gotten so much better. He was already good, but now he was perfect. My legs were already trembling when he sucked my bud into his mouth and incited a slow rhythm. I lifted my hips slightly, trying to give him greater access, and he pushed his finger in my asshole. That hole was a born-again virgin. She hadn't been touched in years.

The way his thick, long finger stroked her was inciting a new passion in me. My pussy got wetter as he inserted a finger in inside of her as well. “Zaaayyy! Shit! I’m about to cum!”

He only moaned on my clit, and that did it. I tried to stifle my screams, but I couldn’t. This orgasm was so powerful, there was no way I could even attempt to control it. Zay withdrew his fingers and tongue from me, then immediately filled me with dick. My eyes opened, and I scooted back, trying to avoid all what he was feeding me.

“You said you wanted to get fucked, Joyy. How you gon’ try to run from what you damn near demanded?” He pulled my hips back to him and said, “Get yo’ ass back here.”

I wanted to cry. His dick was teaching me that he wasn’t to be played with... at all. The girth of it felt like it was stretching me to capacity, and the length of it was at my cervix, begging for clearance. I used to be able to take him without too many issues. I’d heard when a woman gained weight, it could change the way she took dick, and that shit had to be true in this moment. Zay pushed my legs back as far as they would go and began plunging inside of me without a care in the world.

He wasn’t giving me all of him, because there was no longer any tension below. “Had you let me take my time, I could have worked this shit open. But your terms, right?”

He plunged a little deeper, and I thought I felt the head of his dick in my fucking chest, bouncing on my heart like it was a damn trampoline. “Ahhh!” he growled out.

He was about to cum already, and that let me know that it had been a while for him. He was never a quick fuck. I pushed him off me, and he sat on the couch. I decided to guide this ship for a minute. I straddled him and slid down as far as I could handle, then stared at him. He licked his lips as he stared back, and I couldn’t help but kiss his lips. I brought my arms around his neck as I gave him my tongue. His hands went to my ass, guiding me up and down his dick.

The longer I slid up and down his dick, my vault seemed to stretch to receive more of him. Maybe that was what he was

wanting to do in the beginning. I still hadn't taken all of him, but I was taking more. His hands left my ass, and he wrapped his arms around my waist as I came all over him. "Oh, Zay! Fuck!"

"I'm about to nut too," he said as he lifted his hips.

I kept my ride steady, and his grip on me got tighter as he finally released his seed into the latex. I slowed, trying to milk him for everything he had until he lifted me from him. He stood from the couch without a word and walked away. I didn't know what to make of him right now. As I sat there confused, he returned and held his hand out to me. I grabbed it and allowed him to lead me to the bathroom to get cleaned up.

As we got cleaned up, he stared at me through the mirror. Finally breaking his silence, he asked, "You got what you wanted?"

"Yes, I did. Thank you."

He slowly shook his head, and for some reason, I didn't think he was being sarcastic. He was upset about how things went. It was his choice to fall in line. He could have easily taken me to meet Kaysyn like I'd requested. So if he was regretting this moment, it was totally on him.

CHAPTER 5



Isaiah

JOYY WAS WORSE OFF THAN I THOUGHT. SHE WAS IN DENIAL. It was one thing to be an alcoholic, but another not to know it. I supposed most people who were addicts didn't. Not only was she an alcoholic, I believed she might have been a sex addict as well. Both issues were covering up a deeper issue. She was depressed, and it was starting to fuck with me. I let her talk me into fucking her, and now I felt bad about that shit too. I should have taken her to meet Kaysyn and Alexz like she demanded. Being around her felt so good at first though. It took a dangerous turn when we fucked.

I couldn't give in to her demands that way if I planned to help her. After we had sex, I had her call Kaysyn so I could take her where she wanted to go. I even felt guilty for dropping her off. She was trying to go for another round, and I knew I couldn't let her suck me into her downward spiral. I could see now that it would be hard being there for her if she remained this confrontational and combative. She looked hurt when I told her to call Kaysyn, but I couldn't give in again.

Despite all that, sex was so damn good. I didn't know how I would be able to resist her again if we were alone. It had been two days since I'd seen her, and when I talked to her yesterday, Seneca was on her last nerve. He'd thrown all her liquor out. Somehow, I needed to get his contact information so we could be on one accord when it came to Joyy. She told

me she didn't drink during the week when she had to work. I found that hard to believe.

I didn't understand how she got drunk as Cooter Brown on the weekends but remained sober without a single drink during the week. If she could do it during the week, why couldn't she do it on the weekends? The minute I posed the question to myself, it hit me. She was off on the weekends. During the week, she had plenty going on to keep her busy. There were meetings afterhours that took up her time as well. But Friday nights and Saturdays were filled with nothingness... just her alone with her thoughts.

Maybe if I could help her find activities to get into on the weekends then it would make it easier for her. Activities besides sex. She also needed counseling. I could help with that. I couldn't be her full-time counselor, obviously, but I could possibly reinforce what the counselor told her to do.

As I sat in my recliner with my dinner, my cell phone rang. I just needed peace and quiet for a moment. Work had been shitty, and I just needed to decompress. However, I set my steak and potatoes on the coffee table and picked up my cell to see a call from Chad.

"What's up, man?" I answered.

"You busy?"

"Naw. Just about to eat dinner."

"A'ight. I'm coming over."

"Okay."

I ended the call, wondering what that was about. Chad rarely wanted to kick it during the week. I quickly picked up my steak and started eating, because I surely didn't want to have to share with his ass. Chad would eat a nigga out of house and home, and I wanted to enjoy my dinner. There was only enough for me.

After I cut my steak up and started eating, my phone rang again, and I swore I just wanted to put the shit on do not disturb, until I picked it up to see a call from Joyy.

I quickly swallowed my food and answered, "Hello?"

"Hey."

"Hey. How was your day?"

"It was good. Listen. I owe you an apology. You were trying to be a gentleman this weekend, and I took you out of character. Maybe it's best for us not to be around each other."

I sat up in my recliner. "That's not gon' work for me. I just have to be stronger. Just answer this one question."

"What's that?" she asked through what sounded like tears.

"Do you want to be better? Do you want to get to the root of the problem and dig it out?"

"I know what the root of the problem is. Drinking has just become habit now. I want to be better, Isaiah, but I don't want to drag you down with me."

"What did I tell you? I told you that I wanted to be there for you. Don't push me away, Joyy. I know I can't counsel you, but I still want to be there. I can help you choose someone that's effective for you."

"I think I'm just going to go to Alcoholics Anonymous. I didn't have a drink Sunday, thanks to Seneca. I've never craved alcohol through the week, but today has been hard. I suppose that's because I didn't really drink Saturday or Sunday."

"Can I see you?"

"No. I don't think that's a good idea. Zay... I can't do this right now. I'm no good for you. I thought talking to you and being with you would make everything better, but it seems it has only gotten worse. The past flashes through my mind like movie reels, and I can't make it stop." She sobbed for a moment, and I could feel the lump in my damn throat while I listened to her. "I don't want to ruin your life."

"Joyy, you aren't ruining anything." I knew now was the time to tell her. If she ever needed to hear it, it was now. "I love you, and I'm not letting you go. I know I said I would do

things on your terms, but that's one condition I can't agree to. I love you, and I need you in my life. I refuse to let you go."

She sobbed louder, and my heart ached in my chest for her. She didn't think being around me was making it better, but I knew it was. Things always got worse before they got better. She was being forced to face her trauma head on. "Baby, please stop crying."

"Are you sure it isn't guilt talking? Why did you think I was okay after only two weeks? Zay! I needed you! I was a wreck about losing our baby. I felt like I let you down in one instance, then I felt like you were happy our baby died the next. I loved you so much. For you to let me go and pretend that what we shared meant nothing to you, hurt me deep! You cut me to the bone!"

She cried harder until I heard a door close. She quickly pulled herself together and said, "I have to go."

She ended the call before I could respond, and I couldn't help but slam my phone to the table. I was pretty sure my screen had cracked, but I felt like I was losing her. I set my plate on the table as well then brought my hands to my face. My last resort would be to call Axton to get Kaysyn's number. I was more than sure she would tell me where Joyy lived.

I stood from my recliner and took my plate to the kitchen. My appetite was long gone. Chad could have it after all.

I tried calling Joyy back, and she refused to answer. I knew she wouldn't. I shot a quick text to Axton, asking for Kaysyn's phone number. Hopefully, he wouldn't try to find out why I needed it. If I caught him while he was busy, he would send the information I needed without needing an explanation. However, he would definitely ask for one later.

Within a couple of minutes, he sent the number, and I was grateful. I texted Kaysyn immediately.

Hey, Kay. This is Zay. I wanted to know if you would give me Joyy's address. She's not answering my phone calls and she was pretty emotional when we got off the phone earlier. I just want to make sure she's okay.

I hit send and prayed she would have mercy and give it to me. As I stood there anxiously, awaiting her response, I saw the bubbles come up on my cracked screen. When they disappeared, I set the phone on the countertop and took a swig of water from the bottle I'd set on the counter when I brought my plate to the kitchen. The phone rang, and when I saw the Houston area code, I knew it was Kaysyn calling me instead of texting back.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Isaiah. What’s going on? She’s not answering for me either, but I know Seneca is there.”

“It’s a really long story, Kaysyn. Can I tell you another time?”

“I suppose so, but that’s only because I trust you. Had you been Chad, you would have gotten a swift hell no.”

“Thank God I’m not Chad.”

She chuckled and said, “I’ll text it to you.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t.”

I ended the call and was about to bail until the doorbell rang. I’d forgotten that quick that Chad was bringing his ass over here. *Fuck!* I went to the door and opened it. Without speaking, he walked in past me. I frowned slightly, because Chad was the clown. He looked way too serious. I knew he’d been having some issues at work, but I thought everything had been straightened out. I closed the door and went to my recliner. He’d sat on the couch but was leaned over with his elbows resting on his knees. “What’s up, man?”

“Knowledge Rucker. Remember we all thought his name was fake?”

“Yeah.”

“It is. The muthfucka name is Earl Riggs. You wanna know what’s worse?”

I frowned, and before I could ask what else, he continued. “I snitched on his ass on my first day on the job, years ago. I didn’t realize who that nigga was. He was on some get back shit with Alexz. I put my sister in danger, man. That nigga was trying to hurt me, and I didn’t even recognize that nigga. He had my name on a hitlist that the Feds discovered. He’s in some kind of terrorist organization. I ain’t never been so scared in my life.”

I was shocked beyond belief. My eyebrows had hiked up to my hairline. “What the fuck? Let me get this straight. A muthafucka you busted damn near ten years ago, got out of prison and went after Alexz to get back at you?”

“Yeah. He changed his identity and his appearance. I thought he looked familiar, but I have that fucking problem all the damn time. I know way too many people. Man, if Alexz knew, she would never forgive me. I can barely forgive myself. The shit gets worse though.”

I slid my hand over my face as I said, “Alexz ain’t gon’ hold you accountable, man. It’s not your fault.”

“The Feds are worried that this organization knows about his plans and could choose to execute them while he’s locked up. I’m not the only one on the list now. Me, Dad, Shy, and Alexz are on his list. You and Dylan seem to be in the clear, but I done put my entire family in danger.”

“Who else knows?”

“Nobody.”

“You sure about that? I’m willing to bet Shy knows. You need to talk to him. Maybe he can do something more than what the Feds are doing.”

“Yeah, you right. That nigga usually spill shit around us, but I can see why he didn’t spill this if he knows. We surely can’t tell Alexz. Not now. She done been through a lot on account of this nigga.”

“We didn’t meet him until after all that shit though. She was already pregnant when we met him. So even if you would have recognized him, it would have been too late.”

“Yeah. Is Shy back from San Antonio?”

“Naw. I don’t think he’s coming back until tomorrow. Shoot him a text though.”

“Thanks, Zay. What you got to eat in here?”

I rolled my eyes. “I had steak and potatoes that I didn’t eat. It’s in the kitchen. It got cold on me.”

“A’ight. I’m a take it with me,” he said as he stood from the couch and made his way to the kitchen.

“Nigga, I didn’t say you could have it.”

“Oh well.”

That was why I wanted to be done eating when he got here. Had I planned on eating it, I wouldn’t have told him shit. He came out of the kitchen with the plate wrapped in foil and a Coca Cola.

“I’m out. See you later, man.”

I walked to the door and opened it for him. I couldn’t believe the shit he told me. We would all have to keep an eye open and be there for each other. One thing none of us played about was each other. I’d give my life for anybody in my family. And now, my family included Joyy. She was the mother of my deceased child. At one point, she’d carried a piece of me inside of her. She was special to me and always would be.

I went to the kitchen and grabbed my keys to head to her. There was no way she was going to have a breakdown like that on the phone with me and I *not* go see about her. I supposed I had better prepare to meet Seneca. Hopefully, there wouldn’t be any trouble. She’d told me he was in the streets back in the day. We were only nineteen, so he couldn’t have been any more than fifteen, and he was already in that shit. I wondered if he was still in it. Whether he was or not, I knew that shit was still in him, so I had better be prepared.

CHAPTER 6



Joyy

“WHY YOU WON’T SAY WHAT’S GOING ON WITH YOU? WHAT were you screaming for?”

“Seneca, please, just leave me alone.”

He was on my last fucking nerve. It was bad enough I wanted a drink. He wasn’t making matters any better. All I wanted was Isaiah to hold me in his arms and assure me that everything would be okay. I wanted to believe he was right. That he was who I needed. I didn’t want to be selfish though. I was at fault just as much as he was. I should have done something about this a long time ago. I knew that my behaviors weren’t healthy, and I chose to wallow in them, accepting them as normal. Seneca had heard me screaming on the phone with Zay, but thankfully, he couldn’t make out what I was saying. While I knew I would have to eventually tell him what was going on with me, I wasn’t ready to tell him now.

Someone knocked at the door, and Sen finally left me alone to go see who it was. No one ever visited me without calling first, so I was curious as to who it could be. Then I heard him. “What’s up, man? I’m Isaiah Berotte, and I’m here to check on Joyy. We were on the phone a little while ago, and she hung up on me.”

He’d come to see about me? I knew there was only one person who could have told him where I lived, and I didn’t know whether I would call her to thank her or curse her ass

out. The tears fell from my eyes as I was filled with joy that he cared enough to find me. Seneca said something back to him, but I couldn't hear what they were talking about. Within a couple of minutes, there was a knock on the door. After a moment, Sen opened it. He never waited for me to say come in, because he knew I would never say it.

He peeked his head inside then walked in. "There's a big ass nigga named Isaiah out there. He said he was on the phone wit'chu earlier. I'm gon' assume that was who you were screaming at on the phone. I wanna tell him to get the fuck on, but something won't let me. You wanna come out here, or you want him to come in here?"

I wondered what he'd seen in Isaiah to where he couldn't be his normally skeptical self when it came to strangers. Niggas couldn't catch a break around his ass. Everybody was a suspected fraud to him. "He can come in here," I replied softly.

He nodded and left out, and almost immediately, Isaiah peeked around the door. His facial expression softened as he stared at me. His eyes spoke volumes. He was worried about me. He'd told me he loved me, and I just couldn't believe that. Once he closed the door, he stood there, leaning against it like he was afraid to come all the way in.

"I had to come check on you, Joyy. I was worried about you."

I nodded then patted the bed next to me for him to join me. He hesitated for a minute, and I understood why. I couldn't be fucking trusted with him so close. However, I wanted to believe his thoughts about us not being alone propelled him forward. I was more than sure Seneca's ears were perched like a damn Doberman, trying to see what he would hear. Isaiah slipped off his shoes as I lay back in the bed and scooted over for him to join me. When he got closer, he hesitated again. My heart was calling out to him. His beautiful medium-brown skin, gorgeous white smile, and tall, solid physique were everything I physically wanted in a man, but it was his soft core that could have me like puddy in his hands.

I stared up at him as he stood there staring at me. “Please, Zay. Just hold me.”

Without any hesitation, he slid in bed with me and pulled me into his arms. I wrapped my arms around him and cried like a baby. He was everything I needed. His soul soothed mine, and I knew he was right. It was meant for him to help me through this, and I vowed to stop fighting so hard against it. While his actions were the source of my issues, I refused to continue throwing that in his face. He felt guilty enough. It was on me to want better and to act on those wants.

I also knew that I wanted him, even after everything that had transpired between us. There was no man that would care for me like him... that would love me like him. I lifted my head and kissed his cheek.

“I love you too, Zay. For seventeen years, almost the entire time I’ve known you, I’ve loved you. I never stopped loving you. My soul has longed for yours for a long time, and now that it finally has access to you, it refuses to let go. Please be patient with me.”

“I love you so much. I’m here for the long haul. We will get through this, even though it will be hard some days. I just need you to promise me that you won’t give up. Promise me that you will keep fighting.”

“I promise... as long as you promise to give me grace, continuous love, and support.”

“You got that,” he said then kissed my head.

I rested on his chest and knew there was nowhere else I would rather be. Having him would make this process so much easier, but I also knew he wouldn’t cut me any slack on my progress. While I asked for grace, I knew if he noticed I was slacking, he would be on my ass about it.

I rubbed his chest, wishing he would take this shirt off. Despite my issues, I was a woman that loved sex, and sex with Isaiah was something I craved. I would give it time though.

That shit would be torture, but I was willing to bide my time. He would think I was trying to manipulate him if I

expressed my desires now. Plus, Seneca would have to get the hell out of here.

As the thought crossed my mind, there was a knock at the door. “Yo, Joyy. You good? I need to go to the store.”

“Yeah. I’m okay,” I said as I snuggled even closer to Isaiah.

He kissed my forehead as Seneca said, “A’ight. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

When Zay heard the door close, he sat up slightly and turned to me. “I need to see your eyes when I say this. I know this will be a process, but I need you to understand some things. I’m foundationally the same Isaiah you know, but I’ve grown as well. Despite what happened this weekend, I normally have more control. I let my guard down this weekend and allowed you to penetrate it because I wanted you just as badly. However, I’m not as soft as you may think I am. Being a good counselor requires some degree of sensitivity, but I’m far from being a pushover. While I don’t have all the qualities of an alpha, I’m far from being a beta. You won’t dominate this situation unless I allow you to.”

I lowered my gaze for a moment. “Does that mean you won’t be having sex with me anymore?”

“It means I won’t allow you to take the focus off the real issue by seducing me. I plan to make love to you and fuck you as often as you want, but it won’t be because you’re having a meltdown and don’t want to put the work in to solve problems. I love you, and there is no way I wouldn’t want to feel your insides as wet as your pussy gets.”

My eyes nearly rolled to the back of my head from his words. My eyes were low, and before I could respond to his statement, he laid his lips on mine and slowly kissed me, allowing his tongue to ease my doubts and insecurities. When his large hands slid to my ass and he pulled me close to him, I knew I was safe to feel, free to love, and protected enough to be open. Everything I craved when we were nineteen was now mine for the taking, and like him, I hoped I never had to let go again.



“WHAT’S GOING ON WITH YOU AND ISAIAH? HE TOLD ME HE would talk to me about it later, but I haven’t been able to catch up with him. I hope you aren’t upset that I gave him your address.”

“He’s my man now, Kay. I mean... we haven’t really established any titles, but I know he’s mine. We have so much history, and after sixteen years of being apart, we’re finally ready to explore what could have been. I’d had somewhat of an emotional breakdown while we were on the phone.”

“Damn. That’s beautiful, Joyy.”

“No. It was far from beautiful, but maybe it was necessary.”

“What do you mean?”

I glanced around my office then went closed the door. I didn’t need anyone overhearing my conversation with my best friend. “I got pregnant with his child while we were in college. I lost the baby, and after two weeks, he stopped speaking to me. I’ve been depressed ever since. I’m an alcoholic, Kay. It took having him back in my life for me to even admit that. He sent me information for a counselor he knows earlier, and I made an appointment for tomorrow. I also start AA next week.”

“Joyy... my God. I had no idea. If you need anything, please let me know. I know me being way in Atascocita doesn’t help, but I’ll come to Beaumont at the drop of a hat. Besides, I’ll be there this weekend and then again two weeks from now for the wedding. You are attending the wedding, right?”

“Yes. That’s my plan. I probably won’t be able to attend the bachelorette party though. I’ll be too tempted to drink. My weekends have been the devil’s playground for years, so it’s going to be hell to break that addiction.”

“I can only imagine, love. How are things going with Seneca there?”

I rolled my eyes. “Besides him being all in my shit about Isaiah, it’s been okay. When Zay left, he was asking a million and one questions. He doesn’t know details about our past either. So I was surprised he even let him inside the apartment. I mean, he knows that I was in love with him, but he doesn’t know about the pregnancy.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

“Eventually. The nigga is just so pushy.”

She chuckled. “I like that about him. He better be glad I’m married. I’d put some grown woman shit on his ass he’d never forget.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t start that shit. Concentrate on Luckey and how much you love him.”

“Believe me, if I weren’t, I would have fucked his young ass by now.”

She laughed as I turned my lip up. If Seneca knew that, he would do everything in his power to make her cheat. I would do my best to keep them away from one another knowing how attracted she was to him. I couldn’t have my girl ruining her life over some toxic ass nigga. Seneca was a ho, and he was known to ruin women and leave them in his dust, but he had the audacity to try to get me together, as he would say.

“Stay away from his toxic ass, Kaysyn.”

“I’ll do my best. Hopefully he won’t attend the wedding,” she said then laughed. “You know I’m clowning. I’m happily married. I would never cheat on Luckey. That’s my soul. I love that man with everything in me. I’m not blind though. Seneca could get it if I was single.”

“Thank God. Quit playing with him though. The nigga will pursue you heavy if he thinks there’s some truth to your statements.”

“Noted. I’ll leave him alone. Well, I guess I better get some work done.”

“Yeah, me too. I’ll talk to you this weekend.”

“Okay, boo. Love you. Remember what I said. I’m only an hour and a half away.”

“Love you too, sis. Okay.”

We made promises of seeing one another for the bridal shower this weekend, and I ended the call. It was nearing the end of the day, and I couldn’t wait to skip out of here. Lil Boosie’s lookalike was on my last nerve. O’Brien was always trying to be in my face. He thought his stupid ass questions were fooling me, like he just needed information on shit that didn’t concern him. I knew he was just trying to have reasons to see me. I’d been ignoring his advances for a while.

He worked in curriculum writing for the math department, so technically, I was his boss. He’d been in my office three times today. He had to be able to see the irritation on my face. Although I could force myself to be nice, it was hard to hide my facial expressions. No matter what came out of my mouth, my face said it all. It alerted the recipient of my words to my true feelings. That didn’t stop his clueless ass from coming back.

As if on cue, there was a knock on my door. I already knew it was him, because no one in my department required this much guidance. Plus, he could just email me like everyone else. Just because we were in the same building didn’t mean he could just interrupt my day whenever he chose to. I looked at the time to see it was nearly four thirty. *Jesus Christ*. I quickly placed a call to Isaiah using my speakerphone feature, then yelled, “Come in!”

“Hello?” Isaiah answered as O’Brien walked in.

“Hey, baby. You want to go to dinner tonight?”

“Yeah, sure. What did you have in mind?”

I looked up at the fool in front of me and held up my finger, signaling for him to give me a minute. He looked slightly annoyed. *Good*. Now he knew how I felt every time he brought his short ass in my office. Focusing my attention back on my call, I asked, “You wanna go to Tia Juanita’s?”

“Sounds like a plan. I can’t wait to see you, beautiful.”

“I can’t wait to see you either. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I ended the call and looked up at him. If he didn’t know whether I was involved with someone or not, he knew now. “Umm... sorry to bother you again. I just wanted to ask when the curriculum plans for next year were due.”

“The Friday before spring break. So a month from now.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

He hightailed it out of my office, and I was grateful. *Leprechaun looking ass*. I honestly didn’t even want to go out to dinner. I really wanted to just spend time in his arms again, but I supposed going to dinner wouldn’t hurt. As I thought about it, Isaiah texted me.

You want to just meet when we leave work, or did you want to go home first?

I thought about it for a moment and deduced that I didn’t want to waste any time that could be spent with him. There was no need in going home to change.

We can meet there. I hope to spend more time with you afterward though.

You got that.

This man was honestly every woman’s dream. That was why I didn’t understand why Kaysyn was so attracted to Seneca’s ass. Bad boys turned me off. They just reeked with toxicity most times. I was toxic enough by myself. I didn’t need the added headache in my life. Maybe because Kaysyn was such a good girl growing up and followed the instructions laid out by her parents all the time, she craved the forbidden. Seneca was like Satan in the Garden of Eden. She’d better not act like Eve and cave into him. Playing with him would be like playing with fire. She would be sure to get burned.

By the time I wrapped up the email I was sending to the superintendent and cleaned off my desk, it was time to go. I couldn’t be happier. I was more than sure my coworkers could

see how upbeat I was today. I was able to let go of my insecurities about being with Isaiah, and I could only hope that letting go of the bottle wouldn't destroy me at one of the best times of my life. This was what I'd been longing for. I couldn't allow addiction to destroy it before it truly began. The moment to thrive was here, and I needed to put the work in to achieve everything I wanted in life.

Isaiah Dashawn Berotte was a fucking prize, and at thirty-five years old, my clock was ticking. He deserved to be a father, and I knew that I deserved to be a mother. We couldn't waste any time making that happen. Maybe if I could have a baby, things would be a lot easier.

CHAPTER 7



Isaiah

MY INTERNAL CONFLICT WAS WEARING ME THIN. LIFE WAS great, but I had a bit of business I needed to tend to. I had been putting it off, but my conscience wouldn't allow me to anymore. I'd spent every day this week with Joyy, and she seemed to be doing great as well. I'd gotten Seneca's phone number so we could keep in touch about how Joyy was doing whenever one of us wasn't around. I was almost sure that he wasn't totally aware of our past. After being around him for a couple of the days I was there, he seemed like the type to hold a grudge. There was no way he would have even allowed me inside her place had he known.

As I stared at the email from Ali, I took a deep breath and clicked on the first clip. I felt the blood immediately rush to my face as I watched that nigga have sex with that lil girl while her mother watched. I threw my laptop to the couch and ran to the bathroom to throw up. To know there was so much evilness in this world was sickening. How could a mother do this to her child? I didn't understand it. I really didn't need to see anything more. I wasn't sure how Ali got such a good view of what was going on in that house, but it almost seemed like I had a front row seat to the action.

After rinsing my mouth out, I called Shy. The second he answered, I asked, "You watched that shit?"

"What shit?"

“The footage Ali got for me.”

“Naw. I didn’t wanna see it. If I did, I probably would take matters into my own hands. He told me it was some graphic shit on there, though.”

“Man, I just threw up. Real shit. I literally wanna go to that house and drag that muthafucka out of there and beat the shit out of him. I can’t even think about watching the other videos he sent. Her mama watched him abuse her daughter. Who the fuck does that, man?”

“Everybody ain’t blessed with good parents like us, Zay. Dad is one in a million, and I’m sure mom was too. I done seen some shit in my career field too... shit I can’t even talk about because of attorney-client privilege. Report his ass and trust the system to handle it.”

“I waited too long. I should have anonymously reported their asses a long time ago. Fuck! Now she’s carrying the baby of her molester.”

“You can’t beat yourself up about that, bruh. You said you needed proof because you didn’t want to falsely report anybody. You’re not at fault for those perverted ass muthafuckas.”

“You talked to Chad?” I asked, changing the subject.

My stomach wasn’t going to stop turning if we kept talking about it. “Naw. Why?”

“I don’t want to say anything if he hasn’t talked to you. Some shit he found out.”

“Let me guess. Knowledge aka Earl Riggs.”

“Yeah. I told him you probably knew.”

“Yeah. I found out months ago. I didn’t want y’all worried about the shit. I got people watching our back. They been on us for three or four months. So if you ever feel like you’re being watched, you are.”

“A’ight. That’s fucked up.”

“It is. He tripping like it’s his fault. Speaking of fault, how you and Joyy doing? I heard y’all spent the day together Saturday.”

“We good. She may come to dinner Sunday.”

“That’s what’s up. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“A’ight. I need to decompress right quick and try to get this shit out of my mental. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call and stood from my seat and just paced. I wanted to have a drink, but I was supposed to be going to meet Joyy. The last thing I wanted to smell like was alcohol. She’d done well this week to say she hadn’t had a drink last weekend. I wanted to go pick her up and let her stay the weekend with me, but I wasn’t quite willing to throw away my liquor just yet. I needed to be numb for a second. I almost wished I would have never looked at the video.

Grabbing my phone, I decided that I would call CPS anonymously. Fuck my supervisor’s incompetent ass. Fuck the chain of command too. I knew some shit was going on, and I shouldn’t have doubted my instincts. This young girl was suffering and had been for at least two years. I was more than sure she’d been suffering long before she started coming to the clinic. If I didn’t want to lose my job and go to jail, I would definitely handle this shit myself.

After reporting them to the tip line, I felt a little better, knowing that someone would be investigating. All they had to do was get that baby’s DNA. It would most definitely match his. *Raggedy ass muthafucka*. That girl didn’t stand a chance in that house.

I got dressed and headed to meet Joyy. I didn’t bother calling to see if she’d made it home yet. It was after five though, and she knew I was coming to meet her. She normally got off at five, so she should at least be on her way home.

I got in my truck and headed her way, trying to drown out my thoughts by blasting my 2000s hip hop mix. “Stay Fly” was calming my nerves a bit as I bobbed my head. Joyy’s

apartment was only a few minutes from my house, so by the time I was on my second song, I was turning into the parking lot of her complex. When I did, I saw Joyy entering her apartment. I honked my horn so she would wait for me. She turned to look, and I could see the attitude seeping from her pores. It faded when she saw me.

She smiled and made her way toward me. We met in the middle of the parking lot, and I leaned over and kissed her lips. “Hey. How was your day?”

“Long and stressful.”

“I could see the irritation in your face when I honked. I’m sorry you had a stressful day, baby.”

“Thanks. How was your day?” she asked as she walked away with me following behind her.

“It was somewhat stressful too.”

As she unlocked the door, I rubbed her shoulders and could feel the tension in them. We both needed a good fucking to calm our fucking nerves. She moaned softly as she opened the door. Once we walked in and I closed the door, I pulled her in my arms. “Why don’t you come stay with me this weekend?”

She exhaled in my arms as she laid against me. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. My nerves so fucking bad. I will ride your dick without a second thought, Zay, and I know you ain’t tryna go there with me.”

“Listen. One habit at a time. Kick the alcohol. As long as I’m the only man you fucking, ain’t no problem there. It’s when you get hostile because you can’t get it that lets me know there’s a problem.”

“You ain’t said nothing but a word then. Let me pack a bag.”

I chuckled after she tiptoed and kissed my lips. I knew her mind had to be driving her crazy about having a drink. That was why I took spending time with her seriously.

As I sat on the couch, Seneca walked in. He looked pissed too, like he'd had a bad day. "What's up, Zay?"

"Shit. You good?"

"Muthafuckas broke a god damn fifteen-thousand-dollar machine at the embroidery shop. I have to shut the shop down tomorrow to try to get that shit fixed. They better be glad I'm not in Houston, or I would be fucking somebody up."

I slowly shook my head as he shook my hand then headed to the kitchen. I didn't even wanna hear about his shit. All I wanted to do was lay my dick between Joyy's walls. Too much shit was going on, and we both needed relief. From the shit at work to Knowledge's ass trying to fuck with my family, I was beyond spent. There was also the possibility that someone could suspect that it was me that reported J'Niya's mother and her mother's boyfriend. I couldn't hide my disdain for them people. It would be easy for them to put two and two together. I was at the point where I didn't give a fuck. If they fired me for this, then I didn't need to be there.

As I sat there thinking about that bullshit, I heard Seneca yelling at Joyy. I quickly stood from the couch and made my way to her bedroom to find him holding a small bottle of alcohol. When she looked at me, she lowered her head.

"You sneaking and shit. Didn't you just have your first counseling session the other day? What the fuck? Are you even trying?" Seneca drilled.

"Fuck you! This shit is hard! I'm trying!" Joyy screamed back.

I went inside the room, feeling sensitive toward her. I expected her to sneak around to get it, but I didn't think she would do it right under our noses. When I sat on the bed next to her, she said, "I'm sorry."

I lifted her head by placing my fingers under her chin. "It's okay. Just finish packing so we can go."

"Okay my ass. This shit ain't okay, Joyy. I'm going all through this muthafucka while you're gone. All this shit

hitting the trash. How you gon' fuck up during the first week?"

"Seneca, let me holla at'chu," I said, wanting to get him away from Joyy.

He gave me a head nod then said to Joyy, "This shit ain't over."

She shot him the finger as she stood from the bed. He followed me out into the hallway, and when I turned to look at him, his eyebrows were slightly raised, waiting for what I had to say. "Yelling at her ain't gon' change nothing, man. You have to be understanding. You ever tried to kick a habit?"

"Hell yeah. I was on the streets for years. But when I was ready to leave that shit alone, I gave it up and didn't look back. All this is telling me is that she doesn't want to be sober bad enough."

"It ain't like that for everybody. You gotta ease up or you gon' push her to sneak around more. Her drinking is fueled by stress and depression. You don't think you stressing her out with all that shit you doing?"

"Look... you can be the soft, sensitive ass nigga with her. That ain't my M.O., and I ain't about to change that for Joyy's pitiful ass feelings. I'm not finna baby her ass. Tough love is what I offer, and that's what she needs. If she wants to be coddled, she can go to your ass. But your methods ain't gon' help her. That's my sister, and I know what's best for her."

He brushed past me as I stood there trying to figure out how we could make this situation better. Maybe I *was* being too soft with her, but I knew he was being too rough at the same time. We needed to find a middle ground with this. She'd just started her journey to sobriety, so I somewhat expected this to happen. I slid my hand down my face and went behind him to the front room. He was pulling up couch cushions and shit, I suppose looking for alcohol.

"Seneca, we have to find a middle ground. I'm too soft with her and you're too rough."

"Then that should level out perfectly."

He wasn't trying to hear me right now, so I just nodded repeatedly to keep from getting into it with him. Just because I was soft with her didn't mean I wouldn't knock his ass out if he stepped out of pocket. I did my best to avoid situations like that, because I would hurt somebody's son if I lost control.

Once in college at a frat party, I lost control. Muthafucka was all in my face talking shit about some chick I had fucked, saying that she was his girl and all kind of shit like that. I had no knowledge of that. I wouldn't have slept with her if I knew she was his girlfriend. Hell, I barely knew him.

He wouldn't let up though. I kept trying to defuse the situation, and I guess he thought I was soft because of that. Wrong assumption. He pushed me, and before I knew it, I knocked his ass to the ground and stomped his ass with my size sixteen foot. My frat brothers had to pull me off him and immediately get him medical attention. I'd knocked several of his teeth out by that point and broke a couple of his ribs. I hated getting that angry. If I wasn't careful, I could kill someone with my bare hands.

I made my way back to the room to check on Joyy, and she was coming out of it. I could tell she'd been crying. After gently rubbing her cheek, I took her bag from her and led her to the front so we could leave. When she saw the mess Seneca was making in the front room, she released my hand. "My house better look presentable when I get back Sunday, nigga. And don't say shit to me. I'm sick of your fucking mouth. One day, something is going to be hard for you to overcome, and when it is, I'm gon' kick you while you down."

With that, she walked out the door as I smirked and followed her out. I grabbed her hand and tried to smooth the situation over. "Baby, I know he's rough with you, but he's only that way because he loves you. He just wants you to be better. He's not used to the process, but that's where I come in. I know that there are levels to this. I'm a little disappointed in you, but at the same time, I know it's part of the journey. There will be bumps in the road. Just keep trying."

I slid my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to me so I could kiss her head. After getting to my truck, I

opened the door and helped her in, then called my dad. When I got to the back of the truck, he answered. “Hello?”

“Hey, Dad. Where are you?”

“At home, watching TV. What’s up?”

“Can you go to my house and remove all the alcohol? I’m taking Joyy to get something to eat, and then we’re going there. I don’t need the temptation there.”

“Temptation? She has an issue with alcohol?”

“Yeah. I’ll tell you about it later. There are some things in my past that I never made you aware of.”

“Okay, son. I’m here whenever you wanna talk about it.”

“Thanks, Dad. See you later.”

When I got in the truck, Joyy turned to me, and I could see the sadness in her eyes. “Don’t worry, baby. Everything will be fine. You have the bridal shower tomorrow, and Sunday, I’d like you to join us for our family dinner.”

Her eyebrows went up. “You’re ready to introduce me to your entire family?”

“Yeah. Seneca can even join us.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t talk about his ass right now. Let me cool off first. Punk ass.”

I chuckled. “How’s your mom these days?”

She huffed. “India is living her best life, okay? She stay on the scene. She said since me and Seneca are grown, she feels like she can get some of her youth back.”

I chuckled. “How old was she when she had you again?”

“She’d just turned sixteen. So I guess she felt like her adolescence and young adult years were spent raising us. I told her that ain’t nobody told her to be hot in the ass growing up.”

She laughed and so did I. It was my job to try to take her mind off her struggles for a moment and that seemed to do the trick. She always told me about her mom and brother. Although I had never met them, I felt like I knew them. I

talked about my family too, but not nearly as much as she talked about hers. She knew that my mom was deceased and I had four siblings. I was still struggling with my mom's absence back then as well. That was what I mostly talked about.

She was there for me back then, always eager to listen and provide comfort. I was so stupid to throw her away.

I slid my hand to hers, then lifted it to kiss. "Thank you, Isaiah, for being here for me."

"That's my job, baby. When is your next counseling session?"

"Week after next. I go to my first AA meeting Wednesday. I'm a little nervous about it."

"Why?"

"Just telling my business in front of people."

"Don't be. No one there can judge you. They're all there for the same reason. Try to remember that when you speak your truth."

She nodded. "So, how have you really been? We've been focusing more on me than you. How are you handling your mom's death now?"

"That has gotten way better. Her memory gives me peace now. Thank you for being there for me back then."

I kissed her hand again then turned into the Monterrey House's parking lot. Joyy loved Taco Bell's Mexican pizza, but those bastards said they wouldn't have any more in stock until October. Monterrey House sold Mexican pizzas that were four times the size of Taco Bell's and just as delicious. You could also make it however you wanted it.

I turned to her and asked, "What all do you want on your Mexican pizza?"

Her eyes brightened, and her eyebrows lifted. "They sell Mexican pizza? You remember how much I love that shit?"

I pinched her chin and said, “I remember everything about you, gorgeous. Here you can get any vegetables you want on it.”

“I just want tomatoes, jalapenos, and umm... black olives if they can put that on there.”

“They can.”

I leaned over and kissed her lips, but before I could pull away, she brought her hands to my face, holding me to her while she slowly slid her tongue to me. I allowed it to mingle with mine, and if she wasn't careful, she would be bouncing on my dick right here in this parking lot for all of Eleventh Street to see.

When she released me, she said, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I exited the truck quickly and headed inside. The quicker I ordered her food, the quicker we could get back to my place. I had more than one appetite that needed to be satisfied.

CHAPTER 8



Joyy

I ATE HALF OF THAT DAMN PIZZA BY MYSELF, EASILY. THE only reason I didn't go to work on the other half was because if I got too full, I would fall asleep on Zay. It was so good too, but I would finish that off later because I planned to work my appetite all the way back up. When I closed the box, Zay glanced over at me. "You done?"

"For now. I'll get back to it later."

"No you won't. So if I were you, I would eat what I can now. We'll chill out, watch a movie or something, then we can enjoy each other later. Once I start, it's gon' take a while for me to stop."

My eyebrows lifted slightly. "Well, shit, since you put it like that," I said as I reopened my box.

I thought Zay would laugh, but his facial expression remained intense as hell. The shit had my insides sizzling. He was already so damn sexy. *Good God almighty*. God definitely took his time crafting this man. He paid extra attention to the parts that really mattered and gave him feet that matched the damn stereotype. While I noticed that his shit looked small sometimes, it didn't deter me from finding out for myself. When I realized he was a grower and not a show-er, I got excited as hell. That meant that other women wouldn't be fiending over my shit.

There was no mistaking when he was turned on, and right now, he was extremely horny. His dick was pitching a damn tent in his sweats. He couldn't have been wearing drawers. There was no way. I tried looking away from him, but I couldn't seem to. His gaze had me stuck. He often had that effect on me.

“Zay,” I said breathlessly.

He didn't respond verbally. He grabbed me by the back of my neck and pulled my mouth to his. The way his soft lips ravaged my mouth had my pussy dripping with intoxication. He said we could do this later, but if he didn't dick me down now, I was going to take that shit. I needed to feel him inside of me. It had been a week since I'd forced his hand, and I needed it in the worst way. He proved to still be everything he was to me way back then plus some. The experience he'd acquired was evident. He was always tender, but the rough edge he'd developed was being utilized at its full potential.

As I moaned into his mouth, his other hand found its way between my legs and gripped my pussy like he was trying to snatch it away from my body. That shit hurt so good, I nearly came on myself. Pulling away from him, I quickly took off my T-shirt and unfastened my bra. He licked his lips then stood from the barstool and moved our food out of the way.

After pulling his shirt over his head, he yanked my leggings off, then roughly picked me up and set me on the bar top. When he pulled off his sweats, I realized I was right in my assumption. Not a pair of drawers in sight.

I didn't have time to dwell on that though, because he joined me on top of that damn bar and shoved his dick inside of me.

“Oh fuck!” he yelled, practically scaring the shit out of me.

It was the loudest I'd ever heard him be during sex. I wrapped my legs around his waist and lifted my hips as he held his position. After placing soft kisses on my neck and shoulder, he began fucking the shit out of me. I swore if someone had a camera over us, we would look like the scene from the movie *Belly* when DMX was digging out Taral Hicks.

The moment was straight savage mode, and I loved every minute of it.

My nails dug into the skin of his back as I let out pleasurable screams. My orgasm surprised even me, because it appeared so quickly.

“Mm. Yeah, Joyy. Coat this dick.”

My orgasm seemed to intensify from his words, and my trembles exhibited that intensification. “Oooh shit, Zay! Yes, daddy. Fuck me.”

That only propelled him forward. We were sliding on the damn bar top, because he was hitting me with so much force. His long ass strokes were taking lives from my pussy faster than I could count. When he pulled out of me, he hopped off the bar and yanked me to him like a rag doll. The weight I was slinging around wasn't shit for a man like Isaiah, and that shit made me feel sexier than ever.

I wrapped my legs around him as he lowered me on his anaconda. “Oooh fuck!” I screamed.

It felt like his dick was in my damn throat and had nearly taken my breath away. He bounced me on him mercilessly while I begged for that exact thing. When my back slammed against the wall, I came all over him. It was apparent my body loved pain with its pleasure, judging by the excitement it excreted. He slowed his assault and looked down at the action.

“Got damn. I wish you could see this shit. Fuck!”

After watching for a few more strokes, he resumed the pounding he was giving me like he was making up for sixteen years of lost time. The emotions that filled me were ones I could no longer hold inside. The tears fell down my cheeks without restraint as he backed away some, allowing me to throw my hips at him.

“Yeah, fuck yo' man, baby.”

I didn't hold back anything as I contracted my muscles, squeezing him tighter, trying to milk his fucking soul. Hearing his grunts and groans was getting me that much closer to

orgasming once again. Feeling my clit slide up and down his shaft wasn't helping.

He stepped closer to me and released one of my legs to grab my neck. My movements were restricted, but I was giving him what I could as he kissed me sloppily.

His spit fell from his lips, down my chest, and if I could, I would lick that shit up. Pulling me away from the wall, he walked down the hallway to his bedroom while I did my best to keep sliding up and down his shit. He smacked my ass then lowered me to the dresser and lifted my leg to his shoulder. Once again, he allowed spit to fall from his mouth, but this time it fell right in the midst of the action. His strokes seemed amplified with my leg up this way, but I didn't mind.

While he stroked me, he stared into my eyes as he wiped the tears from my cheek. No words were spoken. The frown that graced his face let me know that he was getting close to firing off. He quickly pulled out of me and helped me to the floor while he squeezed his dick. Without seeking a verbal consent, he pushed his dick into my awaiting mouth and began fucking it slowly. I stared up at him as he bit his bottom lip.

"I'm about to cum down your throat, Joyy. I hope you catch all this excitement."

With that, he let loose. I slurped his shit up like I was sucking a malt through a coffee stirrer while he gripped my hair. "Oh fuuuck! Drain this muthafucka."

I did my best to do just that. When his body trembled, I knew I had gotten it all. Loosening my death grip, I sweetly caressed his dick with my tongue as he threaded his fingers through my hair.

"See what you did? You're hard to resist."

"So are you. You started it by staring at me the way you were."

He helped me from the floor then lowered his head and kissed me tenderly for a few seconds. "Now go finish eating, then we'll take a shower so we can get filthy all over again."

"Fuck that. Take me to the shower now."

He slowly shook his head. “Nasty ass. I’m finna eat that pussy into a coma in a minute.”

“Shit, I can’t wait.”



WHEN I GOT TO THE BRIDAL SHOWER AND SAW ALL THE CARS, I got a little nervous. I wasn’t a shy person, but being around a bunch of people I didn’t know tended to have that effect on me. Before I could allow those nerves to marinate, I got out of the car. I should have been relaxed as hell. Isaiah had fucked me all damn night. My pussy was sore as hell by the time we were done. As if that wasn’t enough, he had the audacity to suck and fuck me again this morning before taking me to get my car.

If we didn’t have sex tonight, I wouldn’t even be upset. My coochie needed the rest. Before Isaiah, it had been a few months, which was why I had resorted to drinking more. Sex was a great stress reliever, but being with so many men wasn’t. Last year, I was with eight men, and I hadn’t thought one thing about it until starting this journey. It was time to love myself so I could establish roots with someone else. Despite my hesitancy and downright denial at first, I was happy that Isaiah was back in my life.

After being sure my slacks and long-sleeved dress shirt were good, I walked inside and immediately cringed. All the centerpieces on the tables were made using wine bottles. I took a couple of deep breaths and continued inside. Kaysyn immediately spotted me and made her way over.

“Hey, boo. How are you?”

She hugged me and kissed my cheek. “I’m okay. How are you?”

“I’m okay. I have your seat over here near me. Come on.”

The table she led me to had a huge vase as a centerpiece instead of a wine bottle. I was grateful. Just the sight of them

had me wanting a sip. I knew damn well that I wouldn't stop with a sip. I'd drink the whole damn bottle.

She turned back to me and said, "I got us some sparkling cider."

"Why aren't you drinking?"

"Because you aren't. What kind of friend would I be to drink in front of you, knowing that it's something you're struggling with? That would be shady as fuck."

I shoulder bumped her as we made our way around the table. Looking around the venue, I noticed there were a lot of older women present. It was probably a lot of Mama Shirl's friends. Just from my talks with Isaiah and knowing that their mom had died after giving birth to Alexz, there weren't any women in their lives. Now that his dad had finally remarried, there was her and Alexz's friend.

I'd met Brittany last weekend. She was also one of their brother's fiancées. I knew that another brother had a wife, so she was probably here as well.

The women were all chattering away, and I noticed Alexz walking in. When she did, everyone applauded and stood to their feet. She wore a long, white dress like she was getting married today. It was a beautiful gown that fit her body perfectly. She smiled big as she shook her curly hair and waved at everybody. She was so beautiful. Her makeup was done perfectly. Kaysyn, Brittany, and a few other ladies made their way to her to lead her to her seat.

I realized I was sitting at the table she was being seated at, just a little further down. When her eyes met mine, she smiled and made her way to me. I stood from my seat as she extended her arms for a hug.

"Hey, Joyy! I'm glad you could make it."

"Hey! Me too! You look so beautiful."

"Thank you! This was all Mama Shirl's doing. I would've worn something a little more revealing," she said then giggled.

I smiled. She seemed so happy, and it made me happy I could share this moment with her and her family. Kaysyn was running all over the place, trying to make sure everything was going the way it should. I continued surveying the room, watching the older women talk and laugh like they were at a church banquet. I chuckled to myself at the thought. Kaysyn came back with a bottle of water for me.

“Here you go. I have to do the games. I guess since I’m a superintendent, everyone figured I would be good talking in front of people. When I recommended her sister-in-law, Skyler, they assured me that I had it.”

She rolled her eyes, and I couldn’t help but laugh. Kaysyn was very good at speaking in front of people and engaging. She was friendly and extremely charismatic. People paid attention to her whenever she spoke. “You will do well. You always do.”

“Mm hmm,” she said as she walked away.

I felt weird sitting here by myself, but I supposed it was the story of my life. I was always alone. I wished this was coed so Isaiah could have been here with me.

Once the shower started, everyone was seated. They started off with a game that was sort of an introduction to the bride. I played for fun but had no desire to win any gifts. I probably wouldn’t win anyway, because I didn’t know Alexz. If things kept going the way they were with Zay, I knew all that would be changing soon.

The music picked up and had gone from jazz to ’90s R&B and soul to now some of the newer stuff. We’d eaten salads, pasta, and breadsticks for our meal, and whereas some people had wine with their meal, I settled for tea. My resolve was crumbling though. I wanted a glass of wine so bad, it felt like I was about to start sweating.

As if she sensed it, Kaysyn sat next to me. “Whew! Skyler is going to do the last couple of games. Sorry I haven’t been able to introduce you to anybody.”

“I’m not worried about that.”

She began pointing out people, letting me know who they were. I learned who Skyler's sister and mother were, along with Isaiah's stepmother, Anissa, and her friend Yolanda. I would probably forget all their names before the day was over with, but I was grateful for the one-sided introductions. Tomorrow wouldn't be as awkward. I was nervous as hell about that shit too, but knowing that my girl would be there gave me some relief.

As Skyler and her sister finished the last couple of games, Alexz stood from her seat and took center stage. I rested my head on my hand and yawned as our night activities began catching up with me. My eyes were getting extremely heavy.

"I want to thank everyone who came out to celebrate with me today. This moment means everything to me. Thank you to my mama, Mama Shirl, Kaysyn, Skyler, Brittany, Lexi, and Ms. Patricia for putting on a wonderful bridal shower. I have a little announcement of my own to make." After a slight pause, she continued. "For those that know me, you know that last year before meeting Axton, I experienced quite a bit of trauma, and part of that trauma has plagued me more than any other part."

She lowered her head as her beautiful face reddened. When she lifted her head, her eyes were filled to the brim. No one seemed to know what she was about to say. Everyone waited with bated breath, as she finally smiled slightly and continued. "Axton and I are expecting a baby, possibly in early October."

The cheers that erupted in the building were loud and uncontained. I didn't understand what was so significant about it, but I applauded as well, as her mama and Mama Shirl sandwiched her in a hug.

Kaysyn leaned into me and asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Alexz had an abortion last year, and it still haunts her. The man she was pregnant from was trying to trick her into being in a polygamous marriage, then he assaulted her and had hired someone to kill her. That nigga in jail now though."

My eyes widened. That man had to be extremely bold to try something like that with a woman who had four older brothers and a strong father. “Damn,” I voiced.

I briefly thought about the baby I’d lost and realized there was always someone who had it worse. A decision like that would have destroyed me. I never wanted to be joyful in someone else’s trauma. That wasn’t what I was trying to be. However, seeing how she’d gone through all that bullshit and moved on with her life inspired me. She was willing to love again so soon after the trauma, and here I was, sixteen years later, still struggling. That would stop today. I had the man I loved, and the baby I was meant to have hadn’t yet graced my womb.

The baby I lost would always be with me, but God knew I wasn’t quite ready to receive him or her... or maybe there was some defect the baby had that He knew I wouldn’t be able to deal with. It was time that I accepted His will for me and moved on. It was no one’s fault. Isaiah had moved on and because I couldn’t, I’d blamed him. That was wrong, and I owed him a huge apology for making him feel like he had to be a mind reader.

CHAPTER 9



Isaiah

WHEN WE GOT TO DAD'S HOUSE, ALMOST EVERYONE HAD beaten us here. Normally, I was the first to arrive, but since I couldn't let Joyy out of the bed, we were running late. Afterward, we had to wait on Seneca to arrive so he could follow us here. Joyy said she'd had a great time at the bridal shower, and I believed her. She just seemed a little happier. I didn't know what had gone down there to have her in such a good mood, but I was grateful. I tried to discreetly sniff her to see if she'd had a drink, because I knew the alcohol was flowing, even if it was only wine. Alexz was a big social drinker. I didn't smell a thing though.

I tried to be more trusting of her, but after Friday, it was hard to be. Not that I would chastise her like Seneca if she had, but I would mention it. I wanted her to be her best self. After getting out of the truck, I walked around to help her out. The sleeveless romper she wore today was so damn sexy. She put a denim jacket over it, since it was still cold outside, but the minute we were inside, I would help her out of it. When she'd gotten dressed, I couldn't keep my lips off her shoulders. That had only led to me taking her clothes off and giving her the dick again.

I couldn't get enough of her sexy ass. To now have the one person I craved was like being granted a wish by a genie. Although she was slightly damaged, we would work together

to repair those blemishes, and it seemed that was going well. She didn't seem as angry as she did when she first saw me some months back. She'd fallen into our relationship like she didn't have any reservations about us. I loved that. She was trying to follow her heart.

I kissed her lips while we waited for Seneca to join us. "You look so beautiful, baby."

"And you look handsome. I love this blazer, blue jean combination you got going."

"Listen, you inspire my fly, because normally, I'm in sweats, wind pants, or shorts when I come over here. I couldn't be looking like I been thrown away while you looking like you stepped off the cover of a magazine."

She giggled as I kissed her neck. "A'ight, enough of that shit. Y'all act like some damn horny teenagers."

I looked up at Seneca with a smirk on my face. "Naw. We some horny adults. Big difference. We ain't gotta hide to act out on it. Be grateful that I didn't stay at her place this weekend."

He laughed. "Nigga, I would have gone back to Houston. Fuck y'all."

We made our way to the back door, and before I could open it, Lexi was coming out. She had a frown on her face, so that wasn't a good thing. Chad was still fucking playing with that woman.

When she stepped out on the patio, Seneca said, "Shit. Who is this?"

She blushed, and I knew shit was about to get real before we even got inside. "I'm Alexis. And you are?"

"Seneca. It's nice to meet you, beautiful," he said as he grabbed her hand.

I couldn't say a word. What was I supposed to say? *That's my brother's woman. Chill out, man.* Lexi would probably curse me out. She even introduced herself to him using her full

name. She was clearly flirting. When he smiled, revealing his grill, she looked to have melted right there.

“Seneca, can you get inside and get introduced to everybody before you start flirting?” Joyy asked.

“Only if Alexis bringing her fine ass back.”

She smiled. “I’m just going to my car for a second. I’ll be back.”

He licked his lips and gave her a head nod as he watched her turn to walk away. He slowly shook his head, then turned to me. “I’m disappointed in you, man, for holding out on me. She fine as hell. That’s your sister?”

“Naw. She’s my sister-in-law’s sister. I thought she was pursuing something with my brother. So in my eyes, that’s his woman. That’s why I didn’t mention it.”

“Well, your brother must’ve dropped the ball. I’m finna scoop that muthafucka up and run with that shit,” he said as we walked inside.

“’Bout time you get your ass here!” Alexz yelled.

I rolled my eyes as she hugged me then Joyy. I introduced her to Seneca as I notice him eyeing her for a second. He was gon’ be a whole ass problem. When he extended his hand, she shook it. Axton appeared next to her and slid his arm around her waist then shook Seneca’s hand as Joyy introduced them. He lightened up some when he realized Axton was Kaysyn’s brother. It seemed no woman in this house would be safe with this nigga around.

As we got further inside, I spoke to my dad and Mama Nissa and allowed Joyy to do the same. She’d met Mama Nissa at the shower yesterday and had met Dad last weekend. After them, I had the pleasure of introducing her to my brothers.

Once I spoke to all of them, I said, “Chad, Shy, DJ, Jamel, and Dylan, this is Joyy Roberts. Joyy, these fools are my brothers.”

Chad pushed me and shook her hand, welcoming her to the family. She blushed at his words, but he was right on the money. They all knew how much I loved her, although I had never admitted that to any of them. I didn't typically hide my emotions around my family. They knew what the deal was. I had to explain to her that DJ and Jamel were Anissa's sons, because she could only remember that I had three brothers.

Once they'd all greeted her and she introduced them to Seneca, I grabbed Dylan's daughter, Mariena, and introduced her to Joyy as well. She was already almost five months old and the joy of all our lives.

Surprisingly, she reached for Joyy which caused everyone in the room to stare in shock. Mariena was spoiled rotten, and she didn't take to strangers easily. When Joyy took her, she laid on her shoulder, causing Joyy to smile.

"Damn, baby. Mariena don't usually take to strangers like that. It has to mean that your spirit is pure, 'cause damn."

Everyone chuckled as Joyy gently patted her back. Since all the introductions were made, everyone was seated, Mariena on Joyy's lap, as we talked and my family got acquainted with Seneca and Joyy. I felt extremely happy. Seneca seemed to be getting along with Arrow the best. They'd been talking for a while. I supposed they were kindred spirits.

When Lexi finally made her way back inside, she rolled her eyes at Chad and sat next to Skyler. They were talking quietly as I noticed Seneca staring at her. Before anything could be said, Mama Nissa let everyone know that it was time to eat.

Dylan grabbed Mariena from Joyy, and we all made our way to the dining area so Dad could bless the food. When we made a circle around the room, I noticed Seneca was standing next to Alexis, talking in her ear. She was smiling. *Shit*. I looked over at Chad to see the frown on his face. He didn't say a word though. Everyone seemed to be on edge watching it. Lexi could at least chill out for now. *Make that nigga move around and quit entertaining him, knowing that it would cause some shit in my parents' home.*

I was sure to make my way to Chad after the prayer and escort him outside. Everyone seemed to have the same thought in mind, because DJ, Shy, Axton, and Dylan all followed us out. Arrow and Jamel were too engrossed in something on Arrow's phone to even notice we'd left.

"What in the fuck is going on? Why is Lexi fucking with you like that?" I asked immediately.

He rolled his eyes and said, "She asked me about being in a relationship, and I told her I wasn't ready. With all the shit going on at my job, I don't want her close to me right now."

Shy and I both knew what he was getting at. He was thinking about Knowledge. "Man, what the fuck yo' job got to do with Lexi?" DJ asked.

I ran my hand down my face, and Shy ran his down his chin. It seemed we all had nervous habits, because Dylan had rubbed his head. DJ and Ax glanced around at all of us, probably trying to figure out what we all knew that they didn't. I wasn't even sure if Dylan knew or not. If he did, Shy had probably told him... per usual.

"I'll fill y'all in later," Chad responded to DJ.

"So you just gon' let her get away? She's obviously trying to make you jealous. The shit is childish, but she trying to force you to see that she ain't gon' always be around. It's been a year, man. That woman been beyond patient wit'cho ass. I've overheard plenty of conversations between her and Skyler that I've told you about. If you feeling her, don't let nothing come between that," Dylan said.

Clearly, Dylan didn't know what was going on. Chad was focused on Lexi's safety. He was willing to let her walk away from him to assure she would be safe... that she wouldn't become a target. Shy finally spoke up.

"Man, you can't live life like that. You'll be miserable for the rest of your life. I don't wanna see you miserable. You can't control what's going on, but just know that everything is under control. I know what's going on, and I promise you I'm on top of it. I have been for some months now. You know if I

say I got'chu, then I won't falter. Not when it comes to my family. Don't let your woman slip from your grasp."

The door opened, and when we looked up, Arrow and Jamel were joining us. "When y'all left out? Everybody's eating without y'all."

Jamel stared over at Chad and said, "Oh fuck. It's about Seneca, huh? He all up in Lexi face and shit. You gon' do something 'bout it? You know we got yo' back. We don't know that nigga."

I lowered my head and shook it slowly. Jamel wasn't helping matters. If he was on go, then so was Arrow. It wouldn't take much for Shy and Chad to get that way. Dylan and I were the most laidback, but it seemed like we would be outnumbered if Shy and Chad jumped on the wagon with them.

Instead, Chad sat at the outdoor table and said, "Naw. This shit my fault. She wanna fuck that nigga and get fucked over, let her. I'm done."

Mama Nissa came outside, and we all quieted down as she set a plate of tripe in front of Chad. "Thank you, Mama. I appreciate you."

She smiled softly and kissed his cheek. Apparently, everyone knew what we were out here talking about. It was obvious when Seneca didn't join the men outside. He was probably sitting right next to Lexi, all in her space.

After a moment, my dad joined us. He sat next to Chad with his plate of food and asked, "You willing to let your fear of tomorrow push your future in someone else's arms? She's been waiting a long time, son. If she walks away, she's not going to come back easily."

"I have to keep her safe. It's a long story that I suppose we should have a family meeting about. Everyone needs to know what's going on."

"I know already, son, but you're right. We all need to be aware."

Everyone remained quiet. I supposed we were all in shock and trying to figure out how to get Chad out of this dilemma he was in. This wasn't my brother. He was normally fun and confrontational. This Chad I was seeing was wallowing in defeat. He would have fucked Seneca up by now, but he also would have made Lexi his by now, too, with as much as he was feeling her. She was a beautiful woman, that was for sure.

He was sitting there playing with that tripe like it wasn't his favorite dish that Mama Nissa cooked for him. Almost every Sunday, she cooked a side of tripe just for him.

I decided to go inside to fix mine and Joyy's plates. When I walked through the door, she was already at the table eating. I guess she was comfortable. I chuckled slightly as I made my way to her. "I was coming in to fix your food and mine. I'm glad you're comfortable."

She smiled. "Well, it helps that I met all these amazing women last weekend and yesterday. I fixed your plate too. It's on the stove."

"Well damn, baby. I appreciate that."

I bent over and kissed her oily lips. She was working that turkey wing over. Mama Nissa could cook her ass off. We were all happy to reap the benefits of that.

As I made my way to get my plate from the stove, I glanced over at Seneca sitting at the table with Lexi. They were doing a lot of talking. I didn't like that shit, but there was really nothing I could do about it.

Skyler came to the kitchen, and she mumbled, "Lexi being petty. She needed to save that shit for another place. Chad too confrontational for this shit."

"Well, he's outside sulking right now. As long as he stays out there, I think we'll be okay. He should have damn near wifed her up by now. That's his bad."

She took a deep breath and said, "I still don't like it."

"Me either, sis. Me either."

I grabbed my plate and headed back outside with my brothers. Although it was kind of cold, it wasn't unbearable, especially since my dad had lit the firepit. He kept the outside of the house looking immaculate. He actually had a firepit on each end of the patio and an electric tower pushing out heat. He was prepared since he knew there would be so many of us here today. Axton's family weren't normally with us, just Arrow every now and then. His grandmother, mom, and sister were here. Not to mention, we all had a significant other now... well, except Chad.

"Guys! I have an announcement to make!" Alexz yelled out the door.

I was just about to sit down. I wasn't sure what this announcement was, but she seemed extra happy about it. Before I could get up, she decided to come outside. "Everyone in the house already knows, so I guess I'll make the announcement out here."

Axton stood to his feet and made his way to her. They looked so happy and in love. In two weeks, they would be husband and wife. I was so proud that she had met the one. Helping raise her bad ass was a chore, but that was my baby.

Axton wrapped his arms around her and rested his head on hers. "We're pregnant."

My eyebrows lifted. The tears fell from her eyes as Axton caught every one of them. It was a beautiful moment. Dad stood and went to her. She pulled away from Axton and hugged Dad with everything she had. When I heard her cries, I knew this was therapeutic for her. The abortion had taken a toll on her, and we'd even talked things out a couple of times. She often thought about that baby and how badly she'd wanted it. She was afraid that she wouldn't get pregnant again. She had a lot of guilt and worries that had no merit.

I stood there waiting for my turn to congratulate her, along with Chad. However, suddenly, he walked past us and went inside the house. When we heard the screams, we all ran inside to see that Chad had Seneca jacked up against the wall and Seneca was reaching for the gun in his waistband. I quickly

made my way to him and snatched it as Dad pulled Chad away from him. Skyler yelled at Lexi, “Is that what you wanted? You wanted him to come in here and act a damn fool?”

Lexi looked away from her, refusing to respond. I didn’t know what Chad had seen, but whatever it was had set him the fuck off. He shook Dad and Shyrón off while I held on to Seneca. Chad glared at Seneca like he was ready to tear him apart. He glanced at Lexi, and said, “I’m out.”

Shy had to make matters worse though. “Naw. This yo’ fucking home turf. He can be out.”

“It ain’t even him that I’m pissed at. I can’t grab her though.”

Lexi shuddered then stood from her seat. “If you don’t want me, Chad, what am I supposed to do? Huh? You told me you didn’t want a relationship with me. Isn’t that what you said? I’m confused as to why you even care. It don’t matter though. I’ll leave since you really wanted to do that shit to me instead of him. Fuck you.”

Seneca shook out of my hold and said, “Bring my shit to Joyy house. The only reason his ass gon’ make it is because that’s yo’ brother.”

Joyy came over and pushed Seneca out of the door. This was an entire shit storm, just like I knew it would be.

Ms. Patricia ran out of the door behind Lexi while Skyler fumed. Dylan took the baby from her, and she hightailed it out of the house too. I took a deep breath as Chad went to the couch.

“I’m sorry, everybody,” he said.

I sat at the table with Brittany, Shy, and Mama Nissa. “What happened?”

“Seneca was kissing her, and she was enjoying it. He’d even gone as far as to lick her neck. The nigga just bold. Like, we’re all just meeting him. He needed to chill,” Brittany said.

Chad needed to make a decision. He couldn’t expect Lexi to wait around forever. I knew this had made things awkward

though. Lexi would probably never come back for a Sunday dinner now. She'd moved here to be close to her sister and mother, and hopefully, to start something meaningful with Chad, only to be strung along by him. I was almost sure they'd had sex. This was something that Chad would have to make right.

When Joyy walked back inside, she said, "I'm sorry for Seneca's behavior, everybody."

I stood from my seat and made my way to her. "You don't have to apologize for a grown ass man's behavior, baby." I could feel her tension when I pulled her in my arms. "It's okay," I said in her ear.

The last thing I wanted her to be was stressed, because then we would have to leave. I'd gladly dick her down before I let her crave a drink.

CHAPTER 10



Joyy

EMBARRASSMENT HAD FLOODED MY ENTIRE BEING, AND I wanted to take Seneca's gun and shoot him in his ass. It was my first time meeting Isaiah's brothers, and I was still getting to know the women in his family. Seneca had cast a bad light on us. Isaiah had warned him that Lexi had something going on with his brother, and Seneca chose to ignore that. Although Lexi was shady as hell for carrying on like that with Seneca in front of Chad, Seneca had egged the shit on.

As I sat at the table with Alexz, I watched her talk to her stepmother. She was so happy, and I knew that I wanted to be like that. As soon as her mom stepped away from the table, I asked, "Alexz, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," she said with a huge smile.

When she saw that I wasn't smiling back, she frowned slightly and came sat next to me. Although she was younger than me, I felt comfortable talking to her. I knew it had a lot to do with what Kaysyn had told me about her. While I didn't want to let on that I knew, I knew I wouldn't be able to help not telling her I knew.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me from my seat, leading me to a back bedroom. I glanced at Isaiah and saw him frown slightly, probably trying to figure out where we were going.

When we got to a bedroom with light pink walls and dolls sitting on shelves, I realized that it was probably her room growing up. I smiled slightly. I'd dreamed of having a bedroom like this when I was a kid. My mama had done her best raising me and Seneca. He and I shared a room for years. It wasn't until he started having wet dreams that my mama separated us. Even then, the couch was his bed until she could get a three-bedroom apartment. Things were tough financially, and that was when Seneca hit the streets. I got a part-time job to help out until I left for Howard on a full academic scholarship.

Alexz sat on the bed, so I did the same. She turned to me and smiled. "What's up?"

"I know we don't really know one another. You just seem so easy to talk to. I uhh... I wanted to ask how you were able to move past what happened to you. Don't be upset, but Kaysyn told me about what happened last year... about the abortion, abuse, and threat on your life. You seem to have bounced back from that quickly. I lost a baby when I was nineteen years old at Howard, and I'm just getting to the point where I can let go of the sadness of that. It was sixteen years ago."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Was it from Isaiah?"

"Yes. I think what made it harder was that after two weeks, he moved on, and I couldn't. I was stuck in a rut of depression and despair. Not only did I lose the baby, but I lost him. We weren't a couple, and I never told him I wanted to be. I was somewhat clingy, and that probably turned him off. I just didn't know how to really express myself back then. After that, I went through life looking for ways to dull my pain. I often used sex, but then my alcohol use got out of hand. I'm a recovering alcoholic. I only started recovering a week ago when I saw Isaiah at your place."

I lowered my head and allowed the tears to drop. Alexz caught me off guard when she hugged me tightly. "My journey wasn't easy," she said softly.

When she pulled away, she continued. “I have so much support—an amazing father, four protective brothers, Mama Nissa, and two bonus brothers. They were all there for me, especially Daddy, Mama Nissa, and Zay. He’s like my second dad. He’s easy to talk to. Utilize him. He can help you in ways you never knew. My talks with him helped me tremendously. Were you angry with him?”

I nodded. “I was. When he first tried to talk to me, actually, the first two times, I refused to hear him. I’d been holding on to the hurt for a long time. I’m obviously no longer angry with him. I just want to be better. Just knowing what happened to you and seeing how you’ve progressed inspired me. It helped me in ways I didn’t know I could be helped. So thank you.”

She hugged me again. “Whenever you wanna talk, I’m here. So is Mama Nissa, Brittany, and Skyler. I can speak for them because I know them. Mama Nissa was by my side the entire time, even though we were just really getting to know one another. One thing about us Berottes is we always have each other’s backs. Chad can work my last nerve, but we still all we got. That’s why I wanna slap Lexi for playing in my brother’s face.”

“My brother is at fault too. I’m so pissed at him.”

“He could only do what Lexi allowed him to do. She knew the situation with her and Chad was complicated. It was just spiteful for her to do that in his face. But anyway, I have a feeling that you will be a part of the family, so you will benefit from the family support too. Just remember that. You have one of the most supportive ones on your team already.”

Right after she said that, Zay was knocking on the doorframe. “Everything okay?”

“See?” Alexz said as she stood from the bed.

She gave me another hug and left me and Isaiah alone. “You okay, baby?” he asked as he approached me.

“I am. I just... I need to apologize to you.”

“For what?”

“For making you feel guilty about what happened. I had a duty to myself that I let fall by the wayside. I don’t love myself enough.”

“You didn’t make me feel guilty. I felt guilty because that wasn’t who I am. To leave the woman I felt something for to fend for herself didn’t sit right with me. I was ashamed of my actions. You don’t owe me an apology.”

“I needed Alexz to tell me how she overcame everything she went through, and she told me that you played a huge part in her recovery. She said I had the most supportive man on my team already.”

“I already told you that I’m here for you whenever you wanna talk. I love you, Joyy, and all I want is for you to be healthy and happy. Well, I mean I want you to always be mine, marry me, and have my babies, but I figured I could save all that for another day.”

My eyes widened. This man was so perfect for me, and I knew it back then. Maybe that was why I was so hurt when he stopped fucking with me. Here he was, telling me his plans for us. Isaiah was vocal about his wants and desires. That was another thing I loved about him. There was no guesswork involved.

As my eyes watered, he said, “Just tell me you love me, and we gon’ leave the past exactly where it is.”

When the tear fell, he wiped it away with his thumb. “I love you too, baby.”

He kissed my forehead and grabbed my hand, leading me back to the front room. Alexz and Chad seemed to be in a heated discussion. Her little ass was in his face.

“If you quit playing with that girl, maybe that bullshit wouldn’t have happened today. What if Isaiah wouldn’t have been paying attention and Seneca would have shot yo’ big ass? You and Lexi can’t be bringing this shit to Daddy and Mama house like this. That was unacceptable, man.”

She sat on the couch like she was done, but then she hopped up again. Chad looked like he was over it. He hadn’t

said a word as she continued to chew his ass out, but I could sense that something was brewing. Isaiah sat on the other couch and pulled me in his lap as Alexz ranted. This was probably common practice, because mostly everyone was ignoring her until Chad yelled.

“Sit yo’ ass down! Shit! I’m trying to protect her before she suffers the same fate you almost did! Now stop!”

The entire house quieted down. Kaysyn, Ms. Shirl, and her mother had left already, so it was only Isaiah’s siblings and their significant others. Still, I noticed his brother Shy lower his head. He mumbled, “Aww shit.”

Alexz turned to him wide eyed then frowned immediately. She turned back to Chad and asked, “What are you talking about?”

Axton stood from his seat and wrapped his arms around her. “Come sit down, baby. Let him explain without you being in his face.”

She hesitantly backed away and sat on the other side of the couch we were sitting on. Chad took a deep breath as Isaiah wrapped his arms around my waist. I didn’t know if he was just being his normal loving self or if he was trying to brace me for what was to come. Chad looked extremely nervous, and Alexz looked as if she would snap at any moment. Everyone else was sitting quietly, waiting for him to say whatever it was he would say.

“Knowledge was after me, not you. His real name is Earl Riggs. He did ten years in prison. When I got hired, he’d already been there for a while. He murdered some guy, and I witnessed it. Because I ‘snitched’, he was on some get back shit. I recently found out who he was. I didn’t recognize him, because he grew out his hair and gained a bit of weight. Plus, I didn’t really spend much time around him. I was assigned to a different block. I would have never allowed him to be this close to anyone in my family. I feel like everything you suffered is my fault, and I don’t want to possibly expose Lexi to the same thing.”

Alexz looked like she was barely breathing. Hell, I was in shock. All the women looked to be in shock, but I noticed that Mr. Berotte seemed calm, and so did Shyrón and Isaiah. Dylan's eyes were wide and so were Axton's. It was obvious they didn't know.

Just as Alexz tried to get up, Axton pulled her back down. "It's okay. Let her go," Chad said.

The minute Axton released her, she stood and slapped the shit out of Chad. She screamed at him. "How in the fuck could you not recognize him? It's your job to pay attention to detail and remember shit!" She paced back and forth as Chad sat there with his head down. "Chad! He could have killed me all because you didn't recognize him? You know what? I can't handle this right now."

He quickly stood and said, "Well you have to handle it, because the muthafucka is connected to a terrorist group, and our family's name is on his list of targets."

Everyone froze, including me. *Targets?* Before things could get out of hand, Shy stood up. "Everything is under control, family. The Feds are on it, and so am I. Ali and I have an entire team of people watching us and surveilling places we frequent, like our jobs and even the gym, Dylan. I'm working close with the Bureau of Counterterrorism and Homeland Security. Y'all are safe. Earl is pleading for mercy, saying he was forced into the group by his mother's people. She's Pakistani. Do they believe him? No, because he won't give any further information. He will be locked up for a long time."

I started to somewhat breathe. That was a lot.

Isaiah held me closer and whispered in my ear, "Don't worry. Everything is under control. Okay?"

I nodded as I swallowed hard. Skyler stood to her feet and said, "I need more info. I want in on this, Shy. You can use all the help you can get to keep an eye on things."

He nodded as Alexz stood and approached Chad. He refused to make eye contact with her, but when she stepped closer to him, he stood to his feet and pulled her in his arms,

holding her tightly. I could see him trembling from where I sat. He was scared. The tears fell from my eyes as he kissed her head repeatedly. When the tears dropped from his eyes, I was no longer any good, neither was Brittany, Skyler, and Mrs. Berotte. The guys were extremely quiet, especially Ax, Arrow, Dylan, and Mrs. Anissa's sons.

This was a lot. I couldn't stop my tears. Isaiah held me tightly as we watched Alexz and Chad purge. When he finally let her go, she reached up and wiped his tears. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to blame you like that. I understand now why you've been so stressed and tormented. How long have you known?"

"A few months. I didn't want to tell you, because I didn't want you to worry about it... none of you. I dropped the ball, and I'm sorry."

"It was nothing you could have done to keep that nigga from coming after your family. The shit is stupid, but criminals tend to do unnecessary shit," Shy said.

"Baby, you ready to go?" Dylan asked Skyler.

She nodded, but it was as if he posed the question to the entire room, because everyone started packing up to leave. I could only pray that nothing went wrong with her pregnancy with her knowing about this bullshit. Stress could lead to miscarriage. If she lost this baby, it wouldn't be good. Maybe if I could be there for her, we could be there for each other, because I was stressed the fuck out myself.

Mrs. Anissa made her way around the room, hugging everyone. When she got to me, she said, "It was so nice getting to know you a little better, despite all the drama."

"Yes, ma'am. I hope to spend even more time with y'all."

"I have a feeling you will be," she said with a wink and a smile.

I stood from Isaiah's lap and hugged her tightly, then went to the coat rack and grabbed my jacket. It had been a long ass day, and I just wanted to go home and go to bed to get ready for work tomorrow. I needed a drink because there was no way

I'd be able to sleep with what I just heard. However, I had a feeling Seneca's ass was gon' be on my last fucking nerve. All I knew was my house had better be clean when I got there.

CHAPTER 11



*J*saiah

THIS WHOLE THING WITH CHAD WAS A DISASTER. I WAS grateful that Alexz was able to see the bigger picture and comfort Chad in his moment of weakness. We'd left, and I was taking Joyy home. I had a feeling things were about to get a little hairy between me and Seneca. Just because he was from the streets, he assumed that he could one up the Berottes. He didn't know us. We rode for each other. Even if we were the one that was wrong, we still had each other's back. In our case, blood was way thicker than water.

I glanced over at Joyy, and I could tell she was feeling a way too. She was biting her bottom lip, and she was slightly bouncing her left leg. The closer we got to her place, the more nervous she seemed to get.

"Baby, you okay?"

"Mm hmm."

"Joyy, I asked the question out of common courtesy. I already know that you aren't, so don't lie to me. Talk to me. Tell me what's going on in that mind of yours. That's one of the conditions outlined in your first counseling session. Talk about the things that stress you out or make you nervous."

She turned to me with all the attitude in the world, and I didn't know where it came from or why.

“Zay, I know what the counselor said, but I don’t feel that talking to you about it would be best. You are going to have your brother’s best interest at heart, and I’m going to have my brother’s best interest at heart. So just drop it.”

I frowned because she wasn’t just gonna tell me to drop it and fully expect me to do so until we’d reached some type of resolution. “Joyy, I’m not just going to drop it. We are going to talk about it. I can admit that, to some degree, they were both wrong.”

“No. That’s where we differ. Seneca, technically, did nothing wrong. Lexi knew the shit she was stirring. That bullshit all fell on her and your brother for the way he responded to what was going on.”

“So you’re saying Seneca was completely innocent, even after I told him of the fact that Lexi and my brother had something going on?”

“You said you *thought* she was pursuing something with your brother.”

“To which Seneca said that he must have dropped the ball and he was going to pick it up and run with it. That means he knew there was some history there. Why not get her number and talk to her later instead of stirring the fucking pot at my parents’ house right in Chad’s face?”

“Lexi should have dismissed him. She’s the cause for this, not Seneca.”

“I didn’t say he was the complete cause. I’m saying he isn’t innocent like you’re trying to make it seem. You’re sure on a different wave now than you were earlier. If you didn’t think he bore some responsibility, then why did you push him out the door earlier and then come back and apologize for his behavior?”

“Because we were outnumbered, and despite what *your* brother did, we were still at your parents’ house. It was the respectable thing to say.”

“So now, you aren’t outnumbered since it’s just me. Just pushover Isaiah, huh? Well, you can’t just say whatever the

fuck you wanna say without consequence, Joyy. Shit don't work like that."

She turned her head and stared out of the window like she was so impressed by the passing scenery. This had caught me totally off guard. She'd done a one-eighty, and I couldn't understand what that was about. I'd never said that all of it was Seneca's fault. Lexi held a big chunk of the responsibility for what happened. However, he knew what was up, and he wasn't gonna play in my brother's face without consequence... not one bit.

When I turned into her parking lot, she unbuckled her seat belt and put the strap of her purse on her shoulder like she was gon' tuck and roll out this bitch. The minute I pulled into a parking spot and put my truck in park, she hopped out. She wasn't about to throw me off my square. No matter how she behaved, I would continue being a man with manners and principles. I killed the engine, got Seneca's gun, and got out, too, following behind her.

She turned back to look at me. "Zay, you didn't have to get out."

"So it isn't my job to make sure you make it into your apartment safely? Whether we have a disagreement or not, I still care about you. How I feel about you doesn't change."

She huffed slightly and continued to her apartment without another word. Although that shit irritated me, I was able to restrain myself from going the fuck off. There was no reason why she should be behaving the way she was. The shit that happened had nothing to do with us. My only involvement was taking Seneca's gun to make sure shit didn't take any ugly turn. Chad and Shy would have lit his ass up in that house. They both carried and got regular target practice, especially Chad. It was part of his job.

Once we got to her apartment door, she unlocked it and stepped inside. She turned to me as I walked in, and said, "I'm safe."

I slid my hand down my face then set Seneca's gun on the bar top. "Man, what's up? Why you treating me like this?"

What did I do to deserve this cold attitude? Just because we disagree, you gon' treat me like I got shit on me?"

"Who got shit on 'em?" Seneca said as he walked through the door.

He stepped closer to me and held out his hand. "Look, Zay, I—"

"Zay, can you just leave? We'll talk later," Joyy interrupted.

I frowned at her as Seneca turned to her. "What's up, sis? Y'all good?"

She shifted her gaze to me then back to him. "We just had a disagreement, and I need time to myself."

"Naw. You ain't gon' get time to yourself, because you proved you can't be trusted to be alone," Seneca said, voicing my exact thoughts.

"I think he's right, Joyy. As stressed as you are, you don't need to be alone right now."

"Well, you trusted me to be alone when you left me reeling from a miscarriage," she mumbled.

I couldn't hide my disdain for what she said. I frowned hard and nodded repeatedly. That was my cue to leave. "What miscarriage? You were pregnant?"

"When I was nineteen, I got pregnant with Zay's baby. I miscarried, and he ghosted me."

Seneca turned to me with a frown on his face, probably mirroring the one on mine. I was tired of her throwing that shit in my face. But now she was using it to start shit, and that pissed me off completely.

"You know what? I'm gonna do as you wished. For you to bring that up lets me know that no matter what I do or say, it will never be good enough for you. You need help, Joyy, and instead of trying to hurt the ones that are trying to help you, you need to figure out why you wanna keep waddling in the same bullshit. You're contradicting yourself at every turn. That

shit is dangerous. I'ma fall back for a minute since that's what it seems you want me to do."

When I turned to leave, Seneca put his hand on my shoulder. When I spun around, he punched me in my shit. That was it. That was the straw that unleashed the anger swirling inside of me. I swiftly grabbed him by his neck and threw him to the floor. I wasn't big for nothing, but I hated to have to prove that shit to muthafuckas. They took my laidback, calm demeanor for weakness all the time. Unlike him, I wasn't quitting after one strike. I went to my knees and punched him in the head, knocking him out.

I stood and took his gun from the bar top. I was sure he had more, but he wouldn't have this one. Joyy was standing there with her hands over her mouth, tears streaming down her face. My lip twitched at the irritation and anger I felt toward her. "I guess this is what you wanted to happen by telling him that. My assumption is that there is nothing I can do to help you if you aren't willing to help yourself."

I turned and walked out of her door, feeling the pain in my heart for leaving her that way, knowing that she was going to have a drink for sure now. I knew it was her addiction that had her lashing out at me. She was feeling stressed and anxious. I should have just left it alone like she suggested. Then it dawned on me... hit me like a fucking ton of bricks. Her behavior had nothing to do with Seneca. That shit stemmed from the shit Chad told the entire room. I hated that she'd even heard that shit. She was pushing me away from her because she was afraid.

Everything in me wanted to turn back around and go to her, but I knew that she would have to smooth things over with Seneca, or things between he and I would only escalate. When I got to my truck, I just sat there, staring at her apartment complex, wishing she would have just been honest with me. I could understand her fear. I was a little uneasy about the situation myself. But one thing I had over her was trust in my brother to handle it. If Shyrón said everything was under control, then I knew it was.

She didn't know Shy like that. She didn't know just how gangsta he could get. All she knew was that he was a lawyer, which should have been hard to believe when she saw him. He had his full grill in today. The point was, she didn't know to trust him to the extent I did. That very thought had me getting out of my truck to make things right. I again grabbed Seneca's fucking gun and headed back to her apartment. Before I could knock on the door, Seneca swung it open and pointed another gun at me.

“You know what? If you gon' shoot me, then shoot me, but wait until I say this. That happened sixteen years ago. I was there for her... for two whole weeks, missing classes and everything. That wasn't long enough for her. I couldn't continue being there for her and handle my business. Do I regret that shit? Hell yeah. She never told me what she needed from me, and I'm not a mind reader. We weren't a couple. I did what I could for as long as I could. I ghosted her after that, and I regret that shit every day. I love Joyy with everything in me, and that's why I can't leave shit like it is.”

He stared at me for a moment then lowered his gun. I walked in, not taking my eyes off him. I set his gun on the bar top as he stared at me. Finally, he said, “I know you love her. Why would you have reconnected with her if you didn't? She loves the hell out of you too. She locked herself in the bathroom and refused to talk to me.”

He paced in the front room and rubbed the top of his head. “You ain't gotta worry about me going after your brother or retaliating against you. I should have waited until I had the full story. Joyy has some issues that she needs to get under control. However, I got a phone call today about your family. My boy, Ali, was requesting my assistance with something. You know anything about it?”

I'll be a muthafucka. “Yeah. I think that's why Joyy did what she did today. Chad told everyone what was going on this evening, although my brother Shy, my dad, and I knew about it already. She shouldn't have been privy to all the shit he said. Actually, none of the women except my sister should have been in the room for that conversation. Now they're

worried about shit. I can understand their fear and worry totally, but I didn't want that on them."

"Damn. That's why she all fucked up in the head. Well, I'm gon' be working with them to keep shit tight, so I guess I won't be talking to Lexi after all. Sorry for egging shit on at your people house."

"Thanks for that."

We shook hands, and I made my way down the hallway to the bathroom. I knocked on the door, and she yelled, "Leave me the fuck alone!"

"Joyy, it's me, baby. Open the door."

She quieted down, but I didn't hear any movement at all. I rested my hand on the doorframe above my head and leaned forward a bit, letting my forehead rest against the top of the door. "Baby, listen. You can talk to me about anything. I don't care what it is. I realized what the real issue was when I got in my truck. I know what's bothering you. But I need you to verbalize that to me. I can't help ease your mind if you push me away. Please open the door."

When the doorknob turned, I lifted my head but held my position. The moment she opened it, I hooked my arm around her waist and pulled her to me as she cried. I kissed the side of her head then looked into the bathroom to see if I saw any alcohol bottles. I didn't see a thing, and I didn't smell it on her either. I took a deep breath and exhaled my relief. "I'm sorry, Zay. Let's go to my bedroom."

She pulled away from me and headed to her bedroom. I glanced toward the front room to see Seneca give me a head nod as he headed out of the door. I supposed he knew he didn't want to be here for this makeup session.

When I walked into her room, she turned to me and said, "I'm scared shitless about what Chad talked about. It was immature the way I handled things, but I wanted to push you away so I wouldn't be involved. For the record, Seneca wasn't innocent. They all played a part in what happened today."

“Don’t worry about a thing. Shyrón, although an attorney, is working both sides. He’s working with the Feds and Homeland Security, and he also has his ear to the street. One of the guys working for him recruited Seneca to help out. So you are safe, baby. I promise. If I have to stay with you all day, I’ll do that shit just to make sure you’re safe. Job be damned.”

She hugged me tightly, and I could feel her relax in my arms. “I’m so sorry for bringing up old shit. I could have gotten you killed today with that bullshit. Had Seneca shot you, I would have killed myself. There is no way I would have been able to live with myself.”

“Give Seneca more credit than that. He knows enough about me to listen to reason. Something I’ve never been was a liar. My word means something. So just know when I say I’m gon’ be all you need, you can trust that. I love you, and I’ll go to war for you. I just need you to love me enough in return not to do no shit like this again. Don’t make it hard for me to honor my word, baby.”

She left my arms and sat on her bed. I sat next to her as she took a deep breath.

“God, that was stupid. I love you so much, Isaiah. I should have talked to you about it. I was just so scared. Honestly, I still am. I’m trying to trust your words and relax in the protection I feel when I’m with you.”

I put my arms around her and kissed her ear softly. I journeyed to her neck and kissed her again. “What I gotta do to help you relax?” I slid my hand up her torso and lightly gripped her neck as I pulled her earlobe into my mouth, earring stud and all. “Tell me what to do, Joyy.”

I could see the goosebumps appear on her flesh, but she remained quiet. Releasing her neck, I slid my hand down her chest to the waistband of her pants. She slowly parted her legs, giving me permission to go further. I wasn’t one to disappoint, so I eased my hand between her legs and firmly rubbed there. She dropped her head back, so I assumed I was in the exact location she needed me. I continued to rub her spot as I again

tongue kissed her neck. When I grazed my teeth against her flesh, she let out a soft moan.

“Let me stroke that fat pussy. It’s purring so much the heavy vibrations is causing it to get overheated. I can feel that shit through your pants. Let me go deep, sexy. Let me fuck you slow.”

Her body was trembling, and it felt like she was about to erupt. I wanted to believe it was more from my words than anything else. I kissed her ear, then continued talking to her in the low voice in her ear.

“You gon’ let me, Joyy? You gon’ let me please this pussy in only the way I can? I wanna suck that shit clean first. You gotta bust on my lips. I can’t wait for you to sit that fat shit on my face. Mm, I can taste it already.”

She moaned, and then her body seized. Her orgasm had taken control of her. I had to get these clothes off her ASAP. I wanted to do all the shit I was talking about in her ear. I planned to suck the fuck out of her pussy and fuck her slow just like I described. I wanted her soul, and I wasn’t going to rest until it was in my possession. She needed to know that it was safe with me. I wanted to caress it, console it, protect it, and love it. When her tremors died down, she pulled away from me, pulled her romper down to her waist, then immediately unclasped her bra.

“I need you to do all the shit you said in my ear, Zay. Pleeeaaasse touch me gently.”

Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and I descended upon her awaiting nipple. They were already extremely hard, needing to feel the warmth of my mouth. She grabbed ahold of my hair as I gripped her love handles. I loved all this meat on her bones. *Shit!* It was so fucking sexy. Being able to grab her this way without hurting her was a turn on like no other. I lowered my mouth to her stomach and kissed every stretch mark on her while I pulled her romper from her hips. I eased her back by applying a little pressure with my head, then lifted her hips and pulled it off along with her underwear.

Once I dropped her clothes to the floor, my tongue graced every part of her, from her long second toe right to her creaming center. I licked it in its entirety then went back to her thick legs. I couldn't wait to have them thighs on my ears, but I had to take my time getting to that point. I wanted her to feel how much I cherished her.

I tongue kissed her thighs slowly as her scent tortured the hell out of me. I wanted to dive in her shit and say fuck the world.

Apparently, Joyy couldn't take the torture either, because she pulled my head by gripping my hair and put me right where she needed me. My entire face was pushed between her legs, and she was trembling before I could even pull her clit between my lips. I forced her legs apart and slurped up her juices like it was a sweet, vitamin-enriched cocktail. I pulled away for a second and stared at her clit and the way her entry point was spazzing. My dick was begging to be a part of that action. I went to her contracting muscles and sucked the juice from it while creating more in the process.

The way she was gushing for me was something I didn't take for granted. I stiffened my tongue to taste her insides, but when her pussy clenched it, I almost came on myself. Noticing her juices had flowed to her ass, I slowly inserted my finger inside and began finger fucking it while I brought my mouth to her clit. The inside was wet as hell like she'd already had an anal orgasm. That shit made my dick jump.

I pulled away slightly and said against her pussy, "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you wanted me in your ass, Joyy."

She lifted her hips and shoved my face back inside her goodness and moaned. "I want you wherever you wanna be, Zay. Everywhere you are, pleasure is sure to be felt. Got damn, I love you."

After her words, she released her orgasm on my tongue, but I wasn't done with her orally. I laid next to her and stroked my dick a few times, then said in a rough voice, "Bring that pussy to my face."

As if electrocuted, she sat straight up, straddled me, and slid her juicy ass up my body until she reached my chin. She looked down at me as she trembled. “Damn, what a gorgeous seat,” she mumbled.

I bit my bottom lip as she lifted her hips and slowly sat on my face. My hands made their way to her ass, and I quickly inserted one of my fingers in it. She began riding my face, conditioning my beard with her nutrients. I eased a second finger in her ass, and that only made her buck harder. Somehow, I was able to hold onto her clit, sucking it like it would be my last time. I smacked her ass with my other hand as her asshole got wetter.

That was the shit that had me addicted and sliding in her raw in college. Joyy was friendly and sweet on the outside, the perfect representation of a good girl. On the inside, behind closed doors, she was just as sweet... literally, but she was a nasty ass freak that I couldn't get enough of.

When she began saying nasty shit, I knew she was extremely close. “Fuck, Zay! Eat yo' shit, baby! Make it sound messy. Shit!”

I began making excessive slurping noises. She always liked that shit. It made her even juicier. She was gon' fucking drown me in a minute though. “Zay! You muthafucka!”

She bucked harder, then squirted all over me. I couldn't take that shit. My dick was about to nut without her ass. I threw her to the bed and shoved my dick balls deep inside of her. She gasped, but I held my position as I leaned over and licked and sucked her nipples. The moment she wrapped her legs around my waist, I knew that was my greenlight. I stroked her slowly at first, making sure she felt all of me. The tears streamed down her cheeks as she said, “What was I thinking trying to push you away?”

“You weren't thinking. That's the problem. That's okay though. I was thinking for you.”

I established a rhythm as I stared at her beautiful body. God couldn't have made a more perfect creature. Out of all His creations, this one was the most exquisite by far. To know

that He made her just for me caused me to get somewhat excited. My pace had increased as I rolled my hips, being sure I dug her out just right. “Oh fuck! This some good shit, Joyy. Shit!”

Her nails dug into my back as I made love to her, doing my best to love her senseless. I wanted to fuck her so good until she lost all five of them momentarily, sending her straight to the REM stage of sleep, going from awake straight to dreamland.

Before she could orgasm again, I pulled out of her and flipped her over, diving right back into her pussy. As I watched the ripples her ass made, I could feel my dick get even harder. I refused to nut though, and I didn't want her to nut either. As she trembled, I said, “Hold that shit in. Don't you cum yet.”

I pulled out of her, stood from the bed, then pulled her up as well. Her legs were wobbly, and I was pleased with my work. I pushed her to her knees, and she immediately took my dick into her mouth. “Yeah, come and get all this love, baby,” I said as I stroked her mouth.

I was prepared to nut all down her throat. Watching her beautiful lips wrapped around me was the sexiest thing she could do to me. Her hand made its way to her pussy, and she began finger fucking herself, threatening to get us both there simultaneously. I didn't want her to cum without my assistance though. I wanted to be the one to get her there. I was an attention hog, and I wanted the accolades for sending her to heaven.

I pulled out of her mouth and snatched her up from the floor and lifted her in my arms. “You know I'm finna fuck you up, right?”

“Hell yeah. Fuck me up, daddy,” she slurred.

She was drunk with passion, and I was high on that shit too. I positioned her legs to where they were straight up, resting on my shoulders, then penetrated her. “Oh fuck! Nigga, fuck yeah!”

She felt that shit. I felt it too. It was like her pussy had further closed in around me and had me snug tight in her shit like it had vice grips on it. I went straight to the wall and fell against it, chasing ecstasy down. Joyy screamed as the tears fell from her eyes. I showed no mercy as I plummeted her shit, promising total destruction. “Ahh fuck!”

“Zaaaay! I’m cumming! I can’t hold it!”

“That’s okay, baby. I’m cumming too.”

I only lasted a couple more strokes before I nutted all over her cervix, covering that shit like a raincoat. I didn’t regret a moment of that shit either.

CHAPTER 12



Joyy

IT TOOK AN ACT OF CONGRESS TO DRAG MYSELF FROM THE BED for work. I just wanted to stay in Zay's arms. After our first session, he took me to the shower, and my screams were bouncing off every fucking thing. He was a damn demon that I was glad I allowed to possess me. My entire body was sore, and as I thought of some of the positions he'd put me in, it was a wonder I didn't have a pulled muscle or broken limb. Once Zay got in the zone, he didn't stop until he'd had his fill, and shit if he didn't get everything he wanted from me.

He was a totally different man in the bedroom. The kind, sweet Zay went out the window, and he was replaced with a savage ass nigga that didn't take no for an answer. I loved that though. After our last session, we'd both passed out. I couldn't even remember why I wanted to pull away from him by that time. God, that man was everything. This morning, he'd gone to my kitchen like he lived there and made breakfast and coffee for me.

He almost incited a whole notha session before he left to go home and get ready for work himself. When I saw that he'd cooked breakfast, I was ready to drop the pussy right on his lips. He'd earned every drop of juice she provided. I was prepared to be his sex slave and submit to his every desire. Instead, he left, saying that Mondays were the worst at his job. Shit, for me too. That muthafucka O'Brien was on my last

nerve as usual. I was almost ready to file a complaint on him to the superintendent. He just had one time to say something out of line, and I'd be singing like a damn canary.

As I stepped inside the building, the butterflies in my stomach took flight. The AA meeting was moved to Monday, and I was nervous as hell. Something about the moderator having something come up for Wednesday where he couldn't be there. Thankfully, I didn't have a meeting at work today, or I wouldn't have made it. It was cold as hell and just felt dead. I wanted to turn around and walk back out and go home.

Thoughts of Zay propelled me forward. He deserved the best version of me besides sexually, and if this would help me discover her, then it was worth every minute. What I did to him yesterday was embarrassing. We'd had such a good day together until then. I could tell that he was confused as to what had gotten into me. I was so stupid. I could have lost him forever and in turn lost myself. I was grateful that he had such a forgiving and understanding heart. He was definitely meant for me, because at times, I could be complicated and crazy.

After finding out what room to go to from the receptionist, I made my way to it. It felt like I was trudging through mud. My feet were heavy, and my heart was even heavier. This was getting harder with every step, but it became even harder when I stepped in the room and saw O'Brien sitting there. The last thing I wanted was for anyone at my job to be in my fucking business. His eyes widened when he saw me, then a smile made its way to his lips.

“Hey, Ms. Roberts. When did you start this class?”

“O'Brien, I don't wanna talk to you at work. I refuse to talk to you here.”

I sat across the room from him as he frowned at me. We weren't at work. I didn't have to be nice to his worrisome ass. When the moderator stepped in, he said, “Welcome, everyone. We have a newbie today. Would you like to introduce yourself?”

I cleared my throat as sweat accumulated in my armpits. Just as I was about to speak, he said, “Please stand.”

I stood, and it felt like I was on top of a mountain for the world to see. My legs were trembling in fear and my mouth was dry, but somehow, I managed to get out, “My name is Joyy Roberts. I’m an alcoholic.”

I quickly sat as the group clapped. The moderator smiled and asked, “Are you from Beaumont?”

“Yes.”

“It’s good to have you, Joyy. I hope that something is said today to help you. The first half of the class is for the group to discuss their battles and whatever they want to share, and the last half is for me to offer my assessments of some of the things mentioned in discussion. You’re free to participate whenever you feel comfortable enough to do so.”

“Thank you.”

I glanced around the room, and I couldn’t miss the daggers O’Brien shot my way. I was sure he would tell my supervisor of my enrollment in the class. Well... that was if they knew he was in the class. He wouldn’t tell on himself if he hadn’t already.

I wasn’t prepared to tell my boss that I had a problem. She would immediately think that it affected my job and decisions I made at work. My job being in jeopardy wasn’t something I’d even thought about until now.

O’Brien stood from his seat, causing me to tune back in to the meeting. A couple of people had spoken before him, and I didn’t hear a word that was said. He took a deep breath and said, “My name is O’Brien Proctor, and I’m an alcoholic.”

The room applauded, and once they stopped, he continued. “I nearly succumbed to temptation this weekend. My ex-wife got pissed because I was a few minutes late picking up my kids. I left work late, because I was trying to get a jump on stuff I had to do for Monday. Because of dyslexia, it takes me a little longer to read through my emails, so I tend to need verbal confirmation of what I need to do.”

He glanced at me, and I wanted to crawl under my chair. *Why didn’t anyone make aware of his disabilities?* I wouldn’t

have minded him coming to my office for clarification if I would have known why. *Ugh!* Now I felt like shit. I knew he was hitting on me too, but I wouldn't have been as hard on him about coming to my office to ask questions.

“She was pissed because she said she had somewhere to go, and I made her late. When I got the kids back to my house and settled, my baby girl said that she had been going on a lot of dates and that was where she was going that night. What pissed me off was that she'd been bringing multiple men around my daughters. We'd agreed that we would introduce a significant other before having them around the kids. If they weren't significant, then they shouldn't be around our girls.”

He slid his hand over his face and shook his head. “I was so angry. I called her immediately to tell her about herself. She proceeded to tell me to go fuck myself and if I thought I could be a better parent, then I needed to file for custody of my girls. She has always been a good mother, so I don't know what's going on with her. I try my best to be understanding, since she's the one handling the day to day with them. I try to help out as much as I can. But this shit is unacceptable. I went to a store and bought a bottle of Patrón and was prepared to drink the entire bottle, until my daughter asked for us to go to the movies and just hang out.”

He lowered his head and fidgeted a little bit as the lady next to him stood and consoled him by rubbing his back, urging him to continue. He lifted his head and swallowed hard. “This shit is hard. My mind tells me that it's okay to have just one drink, but I know I will overdo it if I taste it. I won't stop until I'm either passed out or physically unable to lift the damn bottle. I never want my girls to witness that. They motivate me to be better. However, my ex-wife knows a judge would never grant me custody because of my past. I'm starting to hate her, and it makes my sobriety even harder to maintain.”

He sat in his seat and rested his elbows on his knees. I had a newfound respect for him. Sitting there, I vowed to be more understanding of him and his struggles at work. As I stared at him, I suddenly had a desire to talk. When I stood, I almost immediately regretted it. All eyes were on me, and it felt like

bees were stinging me. I rubbed the back of my neck and toyed with the pieces of hair hanging from my bun.

“Although this is my first session, I’ve been on the journey to sobriety for two weeks. What I realized by listening to O’Brien is that we have to make people aware of our struggles so that they can be more understanding. I didn’t want anyone to know that I was an alcoholic. My best friend, brother, and boyfriend know, but yesterday, I told my boyfriend’s sister. I felt so free when I did. At her bridal shower, alcohol was everywhere, but my best friend chose to drink cider with me because she knew of my struggle.”

I glanced over at O’Brien, and he nodded as a tight smile emerged on his lips. “All people aren’t out to get us... get me. Communication is important for progress. I can’t do this by myself, no matter how strong I think I am. Having a drink has crossed my mind several times. Had it not been for my brother finding all my stashes and pouring them out and my boyfriend constantly keeping me occupied, I would have succumbed to temptation. I fell once, and seeing the disappointment on Isaiah’s face hurt my heart. He has so much faith in me, and it’s time I start having faith in myself and be open about when I’m struggling instead of trying to hide it.”

I quickly sat as everyone clapped, including the moderator. My face had to be red, because I was hot as hell. It felt like its flames were engulfing me. After a few more people spoke, the moderator stood from his seat.

“Today has been a really good session. Thank you all for joining us today.” He addressed a couple of people, encouraging them on their journey, then turned his attention to O’Brien. “I applaud you, brother. You’re an amazing father. Don’t let anything or anyone change that. You’re strong, despite how weak you may feel at times. I need you to believe that for yourself though.”

O’Brien slightly nodded. “I wish you luck on getting your girls. Your past may not necessarily hinder that, but you won’t know until you try. You’ve been on this journey for almost a year, and you’ve done well. Don’t beat yourself up. You need to congratulate yourself on a job well done. Don’t let anyone

diminish the progress you've made, and you've done it with little to no support. You're amazing. Keep striving for greatness because you will get there."

We all clapped, and I could tell in that moment O'Brien felt better about himself. The moderator turned to me and said, "Thank you so much for sharing with us. I can tell that you will benefit from these sessions, and you will also help teach us. What you said about being transparent was inspiring. We also have to be sure that the people we are sharing our life experiences with have our best interest at heart. All people aren't out to get us, but there are some, unfortunately, that are. Use wisdom to know who's who. Great advice and words of encouragement, Ms. Roberts. I hope to see you next week."

I smiled as the group applauded. He addressed a few other people then thanked us for an amazing session and dismissed us for the day. As I stood, I saw O'Brien making his way to me. I smiled slightly, and he did the same. "I'm sorry for the way I talked to you earlier," I said when he got close.

"It's okay. Now I know why. I know I flirted a bit, but after you turned me down a couple of times, I caught the message. I mean, I'll always admire you and how beautiful you are, but I know my place. I'm sorry for not disclosing my issues. I never wanted anyone to think I was slow or look at me negatively. Discrimination is a real thing, so I bust my ass to make sure I handle my work so no one will know, even if I have to stay late."

"So the superintendent doesn't know either?"

"No one knows but you. So please—"

I held my hand up, stopping him from going further. "That information won't leave this room. You don't have to worry about that. I just hope that I can trust you to do the same."

"Of course. We aren't perfect. No one is. I'm pretty sure they all have things they're dealing with. What matters is that we are working on ourselves and trying to be better than what we've been. I applaud you for accepting where you are in life and choosing to do something about it. It's hard, but admitting it is even harder. It took me a month's worth of sessions to

stand up and say that I was an alcoholic. A court order landed me here. I was asleep on side of the highway, drunk off my ass, when a cop took me in.”

“Thank you, Mr. Proctor.”

“O’Brien.”

“O’Brien. Then call me Joyy. Listen, I want to help you get your children in a timely manner. Whatever I can do to make things easier for you, I will. I can always send voice memos to your phone on what I need you to do if that helps.”

He smiled. “That will help tremendously. It will cut down on the many trips to your office to make sure I understand.”

When he chuckled, I did so as well. “I’m so embarrassed. I thought you were hitting on me, just wanting to be in my face.”

“Well, being in your face isn’t a bad thing, but that wasn’t why. I appreciate you for understanding.”

“No problem. If you need help with anything pending, let me know.”

“I will. See you tomorrow.”

I nodded politely then headed to my car. Today wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. It was actually eye opening. After setting my purse in the passenger seat, I got in the car and decided to call my mama. I hadn’t spoken to her in two weeks. She knew something was going on with me, and I truly believed that was why Seneca was here with me. She answered on the first ring. “Hey, Joyy! How are you?”

“Hey, Mama. I’m okay. How have you been?”

“I’ve been good, baby. I just got back from Vegas yesterday. I went with one of my friends.”

“That’s cool, Mama.”

“So tell me how you’ve really been.”

I thought about what I just said in the AA session. My mama and I didn’t talk a whole lot, but I knew she loved me and had my best interest at heart. “It’s been a struggle. I’m not

gon' lie. I've wanted to give up a few times. Thank you for sending Seneca. Although he gets on my damn nerves, he keeps me in line. He's tough and damn near unforgiving, but I know he does what he does out of love."

"I'm happy that you're accepting of his help."

"As if I could tell that nigga no."

She laughed and I did too. "I was so worried about you. You probably don't remember this but one time that we talked, you were so drunk. You were slurring on the phone, and when I asked if you were okay, you cursed me for filth. I knew then that you needed help. You've never talked to me that way."

"I don't remember, and I'm so sorry. Isaiah has been helping me a great deal also."

She remained quiet for a moment, I supposed trying to figure out who I was talking about. Suddenly, I heard a slight gasp. "Isaiah from college? Thee Isaiah Berotte?"

I chuckled. "The one and only."

"You've loved that man a long time. Please be careful with your heart."

"He told me he loved me and that he's been in love with me. He found me and apologized me up a wall for what happened in college. He said he was trying to get in touch with me the next semester, but I was nowhere to be found. I was at home, and I'd changed my number and even disabled my social media pages. He eventually gave up trying to contact me, but he never forgot about me, Mama. We're in a relationship, and he's been so understanding with this entire ordeal, even when I choose to be difficult."

"I'm so happy for you, Joyy. That's so good, baby. With as much as you loved him, I prayed that either you would get over him or that he would come back to you. I truly believe not having him is what had you so depressed and landed you where you are. The miscarriage was hard on you, but I know that had Isaiah been there, you would have gotten through it. It was the loss of him that had you declining emotionally. I could hear the happiness in your voice when you talked about him."

“I can believe that. I’ve felt so much better with him around. Just being with him makes my soul feel light.”

“That’s wonderful, baby.”

“Well, I have to go. I just wanted to call to talk to you for a minute. Isaiah cooked dinner, so I’m heading there.”

“Okay. Enjoy. I’ll call you later in the week.”

“Okay. I love you.”

She said her sentiments of affection, and we ended the call. I had to admit that India Roberts had done her best with us. She was a single mother from Virginia Manor apartments that made do with what she was afforded. She never had her hand out for a handout. I didn’t have a clue who my father was, although I knew she probably knew. She said he was around for a few months, maybe even a year after I was born, then he left. I never tried to find out anything more. If he could walk away and not look back, why should I be concerned with him? He obviously didn’t give a shit about me.

Choosing to focus my thoughts on Isaiah, a smile formed on my lips. My life was finally on track, and I would definitely show Zay just how much I appreciated him for making sure of that. Every day with him was sweeter than the day before. We were growing closer with every minute we spent together. I knew I would be moving in with him in no time. It was inevitable at the pace we were going. Since he’d been talking of marriage and babies, the proposition of us living together would probably be coming sooner than I originally thought. I couldn’t wait, because it had been a long time coming.

CHAPTER 13



Isaiah

AS I WAS ABOUT TO LEAVE WORK FOR THE DAY, MY DESK phone rang. I wanted to ignore it, but since I was leaving a few minutes early, I decided to take the call. That would be one less voicemail I'd have to check tomorrow. "Beaumont Health Department. Isaiah speaking. How can I help you?"

"Hello, Isaiah. I umm... I'm ready to take you up on those counseling sessions."

I frowned slightly. I couldn't make out the voice, but it sounded familiar. Thoughts were filtering through my mind as I tried to remember who I'd recently told I would counsel them. I was coming up with nothing. "I'm sorry. Who am I speaking with?"

"It's Chanell. You remember the day on the street when you snatched my ass out of my car? You told me that if I was serious about changing my life that you would help me. I'm ready."

"Oh, okay. I thought your voice sounded familiar. What changed?"

"I almost lost my son. I can't lose him. He's the most important person in my life. Luke was torturing the hell out of me until he suddenly disappeared. I just need some semblance of peace. Please tell me that you're still able to help me."

“I am, but I can only do it on Tuesday mornings at my office. If you need afterhours, it would have to be in a public setting, like a library or something.”

“I understand. I can come on Tuesday mornings. Is it okay if I bring my son?”

“Yeah. How old is he now?”

“Eighteen months.”

I took a deep breath, knowing this could be a problem if I let it become one, but I said, “Okay. Are you starting tomorrow or next week?”

“Tomorrow if that’s okay.”

“Yeah. Come about eight thirty. That gives me time to get here and get settled.”

“Okay. Thank you, Isaiah. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. See you in the morning.”

I ended the call and hurried out the door. I’d told Joyy that I would cook dinner for us. I had a chuck roast with potatoes and carrots in the slow cooker, but I wanted to get home and shower and straighten up a bit before she got there. It was almost five, and I knew she had to be to her AA meeting at five. She would probably be done by six. I was surprised it was so early in the day. Usually, they didn’t start until six or seven for the evening sessions to give people a chance to get off work.

As I journeyed home, my phone rang. Checking the caller ID, I saw it was my dad. I smiled slightly then answered. “Hey, Dad. What’s up?”

“Hey, Zay. I was calling to talk. I’ve been trying to give you time, but I need to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m sorry, Dad. I’m okay though. I umm... I just wanted to tell you that there was more to Joyy and my relationship.”

“I already know, son. One time when you called home, you must have thought you muted the phone, and you were talking to her about laying down with her and rubbing her belly. She

was pregnant. Because of the man I know you to be, I know she lost the baby. I could see that something was going on when you came home for Christmas that year. That was why I kept pestering you to talk to me. I decided to let you handle it yourself. Had you been Chad, I would have said something immediately.”

I sat in my truck in wonderment. I couldn’t believe he knew all this time. “Damn. I thought I was keeping a secret from you. Well, she did miscarry. I was with her for two weeks. I thought that was enough time. But my mistake was stepping away from her like she didn’t matter. We weren’t a couple, and I think I was just scared to deal with her after that.”

“You know what I think?”

“What’s that?”

“I think you were grieving from the loss as well. Although you went on about your life, being around her reminded you of the baby, and you couldn’t handle it. It’s okay to admit that, Zay. We all have moments of weakness.”

I nodded repeatedly, because he’d seen right through me. While I was relieved that we wouldn’t have to figure out how to take care of a baby while we were in school, I’d also bonded as well. The days I lay in bed with her and rubbed her belly were vivid in my mind. The way I talked to the baby like he or she could hear me, penetrated my thoughts and caused me to smile slightly. I did everything I knew to do to show Joyy that no matter how inconvenient of a time it was, I would be there for my child and her.

So when she lost the baby, it hurt. Men usually didn’t bond as quickly as women, but I knew that I’d bonded with the heartbreak I felt when she told me. “You’re right. It was hard for me. But my disappearing act hurt Joyy. I’m just glad I was able to get her back, despite how long it took. However, my absence in her life affected her negatively. She’s an alcoholic, Dad. She’s working to get back on track now, but she was spiraling out of control. The habit started when she was depressed about us and losing the baby. While she says she’d

gotten over not having me, I don't believe she had. I could still see the hurt in her eyes whenever we talked about it."

"I hate to hear that. I know you will help her through that ordeal. Just know that it will be an everyday battle for her, whether she expresses that or not. Just continue to be there for her."

"I will."

"So what ever happened with the young lady at your job?"

"I reported it anonymously to CPS. She didn't show up today, so I'm hoping that CPS showed up."

"Why didn't you go through the proper channels?"

"They told me no. I had Shy and Ali scope things out, and the video footage he sent me made me throw up. I knew at that point that I had to do something. Fuck that job," I said confidently.

"Do you have a backup plan if you lose your job?"

"Yes, sir. I'm going to start my own counseling practice. I'm planning to do that anyway. I'm getting sick of the politics."

"That's great, son. I'm proud of you. If you need me, you know I'm only a phone call away. Just because I'm married now doesn't mean I can't still be there for y'all. I noticed that y'all don't call as much. Anissa still goes on her shopping trips with DJ and goes to Jamel's once a month. We're married, but we're still parents."

"I understand. Thanks for that."

"Anytime. I'll just pray that nothing comes of you reporting those people. I know you said you did it anonymously, but they have ways of figuring shit out."

"Yeah. Has Shy gotten any updates about what's going on with Knowledge?" I asked as I peeped the car following me in rearview mirror.

I noticed it this morning sitting outside my house. When he saw I noticed him, he put his window down and gave me a

head nod. It was some high yella nigga with a beard and tats on his neck. “He just said that everything was fine. Knowledge is secure and as far as they know, there’s no intel that suggests they are pursuing our family. He said he plans to keep security in place just in case. Chad is his biggest worry though, with him being in the prison. He has to trust that the system has his back and is watching when he can’t.”

“I’m worried about him. Prison guards get attacked all the time in there. So what’s keeping them from attacking him? Although the security team is mainly at the perimeter of the compound, prisoners are known to be out there at times. What would stop one of them from shanking him?”

“That’s my worry too. I just pray that Chad keeps his eyes open at all times. That’s all I can do.”

“Yeah. Well, Dad, I’ve gotten home, and I have to check dinner and get cleaned up before Joyy gets here. We’ve only been together for a week, but it feels like we never spent time apart. How is that? Like we just picked up where we left off.”

He chuckled. “That’s what happens when you love someone, son. Time means nothing. If anything, it makes the heart grow fonder. I’m sure you’ve heard that before about distance from the person you love. You were extremely open to having her here with you. Just try not to make her move any faster than she wants to move.”

“Naw. I think she’s as anxious as I am.” He chuckled and I did too. “Talk to you later, Dad. Love you.”

“A’ight. Love you too, Zay.”

I wanted to tell him about Chanell, but I knew I had better keep that to myself for now. If she had anything negative to say about my brother, then there would be a problem. I hated that I’d even told her that now. I didn’t expect her to actually take me up on it. If she had an ulterior motive, I’d drop her ass quicker than the TV network dropped Rosanne Barr for her racist ass comments.

When I got home, I quickly went inside to check the food. The roast was so damn tender, it had all practically broken

apart. That was how I liked it. I got a fork to taste it and immediately closed my eyes the moment it hit my palate. The red wine set this shit off! I was excited that the recipe I'd seen on TikTok had come out as good as it looked. After putting on a pot of rice, I went to my room to take a shower to wash my day away.

It had been long, that was for sure. Only a few of the students showed up from West Brook. So that left me time to plan seminars for the upcoming week. Busy work usually helped the time pass by quicker. Not so today. That shit dragged the hell on. Overhearing workers that that lacked the expertise on how to read people and their mannerisms actually try to counsel and offer unsolicited advice to clients rubbed my ass raw. While they were health professionals, they had no business giving anyone advice of how they should conduct themselves in their lives. They needed to leave that shit to the licensed professionals, which was a woman named Rozalyn and me.

I was tired of just staying in my place and doing as I was told. Our job was to serve the citizens of Beaumont, especially the less fortunate. That service should be to the best of our abilities. It pissed me off when they pushed people along like they didn't matter.

As I got out of the shower, I thought about how I would start my own business and what I needed to do first. After drying off, I moisturized my skin and sprayed Joyy's favorite cologne for me to wear, Creed Aventus.

While putting on my sweats, my phone rang. I immediately assumed it was her, calling to tell me she was on her way. When I picked it up from the dresser, I frowned hard. Someone was calling me from my job. I mentally prepared for the bullshit as I answered, "Hello?"

"Hello, Mr. Berotte. This is Nigel Morris."

I rolled my eyes. He always felt the need to say his whole name whenever he called, like I wouldn't know him by his first name alone. He'd been my supervisor for the past six

years, when Mrs. Sheppard retired. “Yes, sir. How can I help you?”

“I’m calling because we received a complaint about you from Bridget Zeno. She claims that you called CPS and reported her and her boyfriend. The reason I’m calling is because I know we had a discussion about her and her daughter, and that makes you look suspicious. Did you indeed call in on her?”

“Why would she say something like that? That would put my job on the line. You told me not to because I didn’t have any proof to make such a claim.”

I was careful to make it seem like I was answering the question without actually answering the question. He couldn’t say that I lied even if the truth came out. She had no proof that I’d called in. That was an anonymous tipline that I’d called. She was taking shots in the dark by assuming I was the one who called. She knew I couldn’t stand her ass. She also knew that I knew something was going on. That was why she had her daughter seeing Mrs. Rozalyn instead of me.

Her daughter was seeking help whenever she stared into my eyes. I could see it plain as day. She cringed whenever that man was near her. “Because of your disdain for her, we have to investigate, Mr. Berotte, during which time, you will be on a paid leave of absence.”

“So I’m guilty until proven innocent. You’re gonna take the word of a woman who comes in smelling like weed over a man that has been an employee for twelve years. My performance record doesn’t have a single blemish on it, but a frivolous accusation is all it takes for you to suspend me. That’s bullshit, Nigel, and you know it. Come at me straight.”

“Mr. Berotte, that’s my final decision, sir. Once we investigate, if nothing is found to incriminate you, you’ll be able to return to work.”

I ended the call on his ass. He was on my fucking personal time, and I shouldn’t have even answered the phone. However, I would have been hot as fish grease if I had driven there tomorrow only to be sent back home. I guess Chanell would

be counseled by someone else. Honestly, I wasn't even as mad as I put on. I could use a few days off. That would give me time to follow up on some land I'd been scoping out.

I put on a T-shirt then made my way back to the kitchen. Putting that shit out of my mind, I focused on how much I missed Joyy. I couldn't wait to hear all about her AA meeting and how it went. Hopefully her day had gone a lot better than mine. This was proof that I was doing the right thing. For them to suspend me so easily, they had to be looking for a reason to get rid of me.

No matter what I did, my mind kept going back to that shit. I shook my head, trying to clear myself of my thoughts so I could be my baby's peace after her day. I took out the sparkling white grape juice and poured us a couple of glasses then proceeded to fix our plates of food. Maybe today, if Joyy's session had gone well, she could be my peace. All I could think about was going to find Bridget Zeno.

CHAPTER 14



Joyy

THE MOMENT I WALKED THROUGH THE DOORS OF ISAIAH'S house and inhaled the aroma coming from the kitchen, I knew this was where I was supposed to be. I was extremely happy. My workday had ended on a positive note, and now I was here with my man, the love of my life, about to have a romantic evening. I'd packed an overnight bag when I went home to shower, just in case things got as out of hand, as I hoped they did.

After draping my jacket over the back of the chair, I turned to him and kissed his soft lips. He gently pulled my bottom lip with his teeth, and I knew what type of time he was on. I was on the same thing. "Damn, baby. Hey. It smells good in here."

He chuckled. "Hey, sexy. Thanks. You ready to eat?"

"Absolutely. I'm starving."

He grabbed my hand and led me to the table where a glass of what looked to be wine and a plate of food sat, waiting for me to devour it. "Oh my goodness. This looks so good, Zay."

"Thanks, babe," he said as he pulled out my chair.

I wanted to tear into that roast immediately, but I was able to restrain myself. "What's in the glass?"

"Sparkling white grape juice."

I smiled slightly. I was so hoping he would have slipped up and gave me some wine. As I adjusted myself in the chair, Isaiah sat across from me. He seemed a little tense. “You okay? How was your day?”

He took a deep breath and glanced down at his plate. “Let’s bless our food, then I’ll tell you about it.”

I nodded, already getting anxious as to what had gone wrong. He stretched his hand across the table, and I placed my hand in his as he bowed his head and blessed the food. Once he was done, he said, “Today was okay until about thirty minutes ago. I got suspended.”

My eyebrows nearly jumped off my face. “What happened?”

“A woman accused me of reporting her to CPS.”

“Did you?” I asked, still somewhat in shock.

Isaiah was so laidback. To hear of him being suspended was like saying the devil was sitting at the right hand of God. Just impossible. He lowered his head and stared at me.

“I did it anonymously. They don’t have proof that I did it, so I didn’t admit any guilt. They suspended me, with pay, to investigate. I’d spoken to my supervisor in the past about reporting her, and he told me I didn’t have any proof of what I suspected. So he naturally thinks that I did it anyway.”

“That’s bullshit. Sounds like he doesn’t like you for whatever reason. What is there not to like about Isaiah Dashawn Berotte? You’re the only man I know that’s close to perfection.”

“He’s not qualified for the position he’s in, and the entire department is a mess. Rozalyn and I are the only licensed counselors, yet everyone is offering their advice to people like they are qualified to do so. They need to get licensed so we won’t be so shorthanded, or they need to hire more counselors. I’m at the end of my rope with that place anyway. I’m going to start my own counseling service.”

“Wow, baby. That’s great. For what it’s worth, I think you’re amazing, and they would be losing a major asset if they

lost you.”

“*When* they lose me. It’s inevitable. What you think of me is worth a lot, so thank you.”

I gave him a slight smile, and I took the first forkful of my food. I moaned loudly and closed my eyes. The beef meat was so tender. It practically melted in my mouth. When I opened my eyes, Zay was staring at me with a smirk on his lips. I did my best to hold in my smile as I asked, “What?”

“Don’t what me, woman. You moan like that again and you won’t get to enjoy this food. Now, tell me about your day. How did the meeting go?”

I smiled big, and it caused him to do the same. Before I could speak, he said, “That’s what I like to see. The way your full cheeks rise, causing your eyes to narrow into small slits, lets me know that you’re extremely satisfied. Damn. I miss that smile.”

His words only caused me to smile harder. “Yes. I’m satisfied. Just from listening to someone else talk, seeing the error in his journey, caused me to see the error in mine. Just that I needed to make people aware of my struggles so they can help me... namely you. You know my struggles with alcohol, but when I’m feeling a certain way, I need to voice it and stop holding things inside. It only confirmed what I needed to do and why things happened the way they did Sunday.”

“That’s good, baby. I’m happy it went well. I was worried that if you didn’t get something out of it, it would be difficult to get you to go back. No one wants to be subjected to something they feel isn’t benefitting them.”

He gave my hand a squeeze and smiled then went back to his food. We ate in silence, enjoying the meal he’d cooked. I could tell he was a little worried. I stood from the table and took my plate to his side of the table. When I sat next to him, he stared at me, waiting to see why I’d moved. I picked up a forkful of food and put it to his mouth. He smiled and opened to receive it. Wrapping his arm around my waist, he pulled me closer to him. I could be this way with him forever.

After he swallowed his food, he said, “I’m not one to beat around the bush. I think you know that about me. I’m not usually nervous about expressing myself either. But what I want to ask you gives me pause. I don’t want to move too quickly, but I want you to know of where I stand.”

I lowered his fork to the plate then lifted my hand to palm his cheek. “Tell me.”

He licked his lips then grabbed my hand and kissed it. “I would love for you to move in with me and let Seneca have that apartment. But whenever you’re ready. There’s no rush.”

I smiled at him. I figured that was what he was going to say. “How about we wait until after Alexz and Axton’s wedding?”

He lowered his face to mine and kissed my lips. “Sounds like a plan. I love you, and it would do my heart good to be able to say that to you face to face every morning when I open my eyes.”

I closed my eyes as he pulled me even closer. I stood and lifted my skirt to my waist and straddled his lap. He slid his large hands up my thighs as I said, “What my man wants, my man gets. You have all of me, Isaiah. I could never doubt anything that comes from your lips. Being with you has healed my soul, and I can’t wait to see the levels it will go in you care.”

He kissed my chest through my shirt, and I placed my hands at the back of his head. When he looked up at me, I knew that just that fast, dinner had been put on the back burner. He was ready for dessert.



THE WEDDING WAS ABOUT TO START, AND I WAS ANXIOUS TO see just how good Zay looked in his suit. I’d seen it on the hanger, and I could only fantasize about how it fit him. It was a beige colored suit, and it was paired with a seafoam green shirt. The tie and hanky were multicolored, but the primary color was turquoise. It was beautiful. He told me that they

were all getting dressed at the venue. That was why I didn't get a chance to see what he looked like with it on. Although I begged for him to model it for me, he was able to resist.

As I sat in my chair, looking at all the beautiful decorations, the musician began playing, simply to entertain us. We had another ten minutes or so before the ceremony began. I glanced around at the intimate crowd of people, and most of them looked excited to be there. There was one lady, though, that looked like she was either upset or in deep thought about something. I frowned slightly, but as I did, she noticed me looking at her. She smiled politely and nodded her head.

She was a beautiful woman, slender with long hair. From what I could tell, she looked to be tall with long legs. She was a model type. Her skin tone was radiant and almost golden looking. I didn't recall seeing her at the bridal shower, but that didn't mean a thing. Chad's words briefly entered my mind, but I quickly dispelled them. Everyone here had to have an invite and show proof of it before entering the venue.

I looked away as the musician played "Say Yes" by Floetry and bobbed my head slightly. That song was just so damned sexy. It would never get old to me. By the time he finished the song, it was time for the ceremony to start. The officiant, Axton, and Arrow walked in, and shortly after, an usher walked Mrs. Anissa in, then Mr. and Mrs. Vaughn. For some reason, my eyes made their way to that woman again, and still, there was no smile.

I could feel my heart quicken a bit. There was something about her that just wasn't sitting right with me. Before I could give it any more thought, Isaiah was walking in with Kaysyn. My baby stole the damn show. He was so tall and majestic looking. He walked with his head held high, and his posture was straight as a board. I wanted to bow at his damn feet. When they passed where I was sitting, he winked at me, and damn if my pussy didn't wink back. I was already undressing him with my eyes, imagining myself licking the tattoo on the right side of his chest and right shoulder that led to the full sleeve on his right arm.

I squirmed in my seat slightly as I noticed that woman staring at my man too. She didn't know he was taken, so I would let her make it for now. I wasn't above fighting a bitch though. Once I established some boundaries and she still chose to cross them, I would beat her pretty ass. After everyone had walked in, the music began to play, indicating it was time for the bride to enter. Axton looked extremely happy, not a nervous bone in his body.

When I turned to look at Alexz, her mermaid styled, sleeveless gown took my breath away. There were sexy illusion panels throughout the lace and rhinestones and plenty of cleavage. *Jesus!* This Berotte princess left no stone unturned. Had I been gay, she would have definitely been my speed. Her tanned skin was glowing, and her naturally curly hair was pulled up into a beautiful but messy ball of curls.

Mr. Berotte was grinning from ear to ear, seemingly proud of his beautiful baby girl. I turned back to the altar to see Axton's red face and him holding his hands in front of his face as if he were praying. Arrow patted his shoulder as Shyrón approached him and did the same. My eyes drifted over to my man just in time to see the tear fall from his eye. He quickly swiped it. Alexz and Dylan were his babies. I could clearly see that whenever we were around them. All his siblings were close to him, but those two even more so.

Watching him be so emotional during this moment had me feeling the same way. However, what made the tears fall was Mr. Berotte gently cupping Alexz's face and kissing her forehead. The tears were falling down his cheeks unashamedly as he relinquished his hold on his daughter to Axton. There couldn't have been a dry eye in the place. As Mr. Berotte stood in the aisle, Axton led her to the altar. They immediately turned to one another, and for the entire wedding, their eyes barely left one another's.

I dropped tears a few times throughout the wedding, especially when there was some video footage playing of her mother while she was pregnant with her. A young Isaiah was rubbing her belly as she held Dylan in her arms. Apparently, none of them had seen this video or had at least forgotten it

existed. Every last one of them cried. Even Mrs. Anissa cried as she consoled Mr. Berotte. He didn't shed nearly as many tears as Isaiah and his siblings though.

It was when she started speaking that made the moment so beautiful.

"I can't wait until our princess gets here. Alexzandria Berotte. Have you decided on her middle name yet?"

"No. I feel like it will hit me when she gets here."

She chuckled and playfully rolled her eyes. "You know, she's going to be so spoiled, but she's going to be strong at the same time. You and these boys will be wrapped around her fingers. We will have to remember to cherish those moments though, because before we know it, she'll be graduating from college, getting married, and having babies of her own."

"I don't even want to think about that right now. Whoever she marries gon' have his work cut out trying to prove himself worthy. That's for sure."

Everyone laughed at that statement as Axton dramatically nodded his head.

"Thank you, Marie Berotte, for agreeing to try once more for our baby girl. I hope she looks like you and has your amazing personality and heart. You're a gift from God. Now let's go so we can get our baby girl here."

The video ended, and Alexz broke away from Axton and rushed to her father and hugged him tightly. I patted the tears away from my face as I brought my eyes to my man. He looked like he was barely holding it together. I wanted to stand from my seat and go to him. The minute Brittany and Skyler made their way to their men, I stood from my seat and quickly walked over to Isaiah. I hugged him tightly and kissed his cheek then wrapped my arms around him. When Lexi walked over to Chad, it seemed like the world stood still.

I didn't know if she just didn't want him feeling weird being the only Berotte son without a woman to console him or if she was genuinely concerned about him. Whatever the reason, he accepted her show of affection.

I looked up at Zay and gently wiped away his tears. “I love you, baby.”

He nodded and smiled tightly. “I love you too,” he said then cleared his throat.

As I walked to my seat, I noticed that woman staring at me. *Okay, now you know, bitch.* When her eyes met mine, she smiled again. I didn’t smile back this time, just so she knew that I was peeping game. Once I sat and looked back toward the altar and saw Shyrón’s frown, I followed his line of vision. It looked like he was looking right at that lady. He pulled his phone from his jacket and quickly did something on it, then slid it back in his pocket. Now I was nervous all over again.

For him to look as bothered as he did, something had to be wrong. Dylan said something in his ear, and he said something back. When Dylan’s eyes widened somewhat, I knew. Everything in me wanted to haul ass out of here, but there was no way I would overreact and make a scene at Alexz’s wedding. It could be nothing. Shyrón took his attention away from her, so I brought my attention back to my man to find him staring at me. Seeing him break down that way for his mother was debilitating for a moment. I could only imagine how he felt to lose someone so close to him.

I was more than sure me losing him for all those years couldn’t even compare to the loss he felt by not having his biological mother. As I smiled at him, he gave me a wink. He’d been in a great mood all week despite the fact that he hadn’t been back to work yet. He’d been calling to check their progress. He learned that the state removed the young woman from the home and were trying to get a judge to sign off on a DNA test. They wanted to do a DNA test on the unborn baby and the young lady’s mother’s boyfriend.

I told Isaiah that I hoped that alone caused them to end the investigation. However, he assured me it wouldn’t. He said they were looking for proof that suggested he was the one who alerted CPS. If they found anything that pointed back to him, they would fire him for insubordination, regardless of if he was right or not. That was fucked up to me. Seemed like his boss should be the one getting fired if it was proven that the

man was the father of that baby. Isaiah said he would be at peace no matter what the outcome, so I'd dropped the conversation altogether.

The officiant was finally able to pull everyone back together to finish the ceremony. Even he seemed to have a tough time watching everyone's emotions on display. I wasn't sure if he knew Isaiah's mother or not, but had anyone watched me cry, they would have assumed that I knew her too. When it was time for Axton to salute his bride, he didn't hold anything back. Chad's lip was turned up, and I wasn't sure if it was planned or not, but Zay and all his brothers, including Anissa's sons, all turned their backs.

When Axton and Alexz finally stepped off the cloud they were on and heard the laughter of the crowd, Alexz quickly went down the row and pushed each one of them while the photographer snapped away. After they filed out, we all did the same to head to the other side of the building for the reception. They'd divided the huge room to be able to decorate for the ceremony and have totally different decorations for the reception.

I quickly went to Isaiah, as he waited for instruction from the photographer, and kissed his lips. "Don't tell my man, but damn, you fine. This suit is doing thangs for you that I can't ignore."

"Your man better watch out, because if you put them pretty lips on me again, it's gon' sound like a murder in progress in that bathroom."

"Must you always talk about sex, Zay?" I asked with a laugh.

"Hell yeah. Have you looked in the mirror lately? This turquoise dress against your beautiful skin is about to have me at full potential, letting everybody get a peek at your business. Plus... I mean, just imagining what your insides feel like is enough to have me ruining these pants."

I had to be blushing hard, because my entire body heated up. I gently bit my bottom lip then said, "I'm down if you are."

His eyes widened, then he bit his bottom lip. “Soon as these pictures over with, I’m coming to find you, girl.”

I chuckled as he kissed my cheek and walked away with the wedding party. As he did, I felt eyes on me. Turning to the side slightly, I saw her. She was staring at us like her business was over here. I frowned slightly, and just as I decided to approach her, a man did and gripped her elbow, escorting her to the door.

CHAPTER 15



Isaiah

“I KNOW YOU FUCKING LYING! WHY THE FUCK WAS SHE here?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but I wasn’t about to wait around to find out. I messaged Ali and told him to get her ass out of here as soon as the ceremony was over. I don’t know how the fuck she got an invite, but if Alexz invited her, that was something she should have made me aware of,” Shy said.

Dylan ran his hand over his waves then gently patted Mariena’s bottom. The three of us were huddled up away from everyone talking about why the fuck Knowledge’s baby mama was at the wedding. When Shy told me that she was here, I nearly swallowed my tongue. He told me that he and Alexz had a sit down with her not too long ago, and she made it seem like she was no longer involved with him, but he said he had suspected that was bullshit, especially being she had a son to raise. He’d checked to see if there was a divorce on file, and there was. So she wasn’t lying about that.

However, something just didn’t seem right about her. Alexz had never noticed there was any commotion, which there really wasn’t since she left peacefully. That shit had me on edge though. I tried to relax so Joyy didn’t get worked up. I noticed her watching her. “What’s her name?” I asked Shy.

“Fatima. She seemed to have an infatuation with you. Joyy noticed too. She was giving that woman daggers, begging her

to try something.”

I smiled slightly. I'd noticed that shit too when she walked to her seat after she'd come up to the altar to hug me. I'd never seen that side of her, but I was glad she had it. She looked like she was ready to go to war, and all Fatima had done was looked at me. I chuckled at the thought of it.

“I'm gon' take care of her after I talk to Alexz. I just don't think it's wise for Alexz to try to form any type of relationship with her, if that's what she's doing,” Shy said.

“I agree,” I voiced.

Dylan simply nodded as we returned to the group to get group photos. I just wanted them to get done so I could go and spend time with my baby. She looked so beautiful. That turquoise dress clung to her every curve, and I was a little jealous of that shit because I wanted to cling to them curves just like that. Wrapping her in my arms was the best feeling in the world. Her soft body did wonders for my soul. When my spirit was in turmoil, she brought peace. Nothing else mattered.

I'd been off work for nearly two weeks and hadn't heard of any progress concerning this investigation they were doing. I had a feeling they were combing through everything trying to find fault in me. They wouldn't find shit though. I wasn't worried in the least. That had given me time to really research what I needed to do to start my business. I'd begun formulating my business plan so I could get a loan. I could rent a building or space in the beginning, but eventually, I would want my own facilities.

Once we were done, I was about to head to the reception, but my dad stopped me. “Hey, son. Is everything good?”

“Yes, sir. Everything's cool.”

He had been checking on me every day since I'd been suspended. The old Isaiah would have been depressed as hell. I'd gotten to a point in my life where I just didn't give a fuck about that job anymore. My baby sister had made me aware of my ability to sustain myself. I was a damn good counselor

when it came to adolescents. The City of Beaumont knew that shit. However, I didn't need them to validate me, but they *did* need to appreciate me while they still had me.

He patted my back as I smiled at him. "That video almost took me out. I remember that day vividly. She'd kissed us all before y'all left saying she would see us later and how we would welcome our little sister into the world. Man, that brought back memories. She was so beautiful."

"That she was. I felt like Alexz needed to be reminded of just how much her mother already loved her. I showed her this video when she was around five, but she hadn't seen it since, and I don't think she remembers it at all. I'm sorry if I tortured you guys with it. It's gotten a lot easier for me to watch. My tears were simply from watching yours."

I shook his hand then hugged him. "We all needed to see it to be reminded how happy she was and how happy and successful she wanted us to be. Her sentiments for her new baby were her same sentiments for her sons. We had an amazing mother, and now we have another amazing one," I said as I glanced at Mama Nissa.

"That you did, and that you do, son."

I smiled as she approached then kissed her cheek once she looped her arm around Dad's. Turning to head to the reception, I saw Chad and Lexi walk out together hand in hand. He seemed to really have a hard time with the video, and I knew he saw Fatima being escorted out by Ali. My brother seemed to be on a downward spiral mentally. I made a mental note to spend as much time with him as possible while I was off and when he wasn't at work.

This shit would tear me apart if I were in his shoes, so I knew how he had to be feeling. The entire family was threatened because of something that happened to him at his job. That was crazy as hell that some people could be that evil. How you retaliate against someone for doing their job? I could see if Knowledge was innocent, and Chad had made a mistake. However, I believed Chad felt most guilty about not

recognizing him when he pursued Alexz. Once again, that shit would eat me alive too.

Chad's problem was he didn't often verbalize shit. He'd let it fester inside of him until he exploded. When we all walked inside the reception area, Lexi went a different direction, so I approached him. "Everything good, man?"

"Yeah. That video just tore me up."

"That's all?"

He glanced at me but didn't say anything. I followed him to his seat at the head table and sat next to him. "Chad, you can't get through this alone, man. When have I not been there for you? You my first lil brother. The first one to make me a big brother. I'm always here for you, whatever the situation may be. I always got your back."

He glanced at me again then took a sip of the tea that was already on the table. "You saw that woman get escorted out?" he asked.

"I saw her. And?"

"What if she had ill intentions?"

"What if she did? She was escorted out before she could do anything. Don't dwell on the what if. The fact is that she didn't."

He nodded. "I'm trying, Zay. This shit is sucking all the life out of me."

"I can tell. Stop letting it. When you find yourself alone and in a sunken place, get out the house, call somebody, go workout. I'm gon' be coming around more, so get used to seeing my face. Remember how I used to act a fool after Mama died to get you in a better mood? All that shit finna make a comeback, because I need the old Chad back."

"Aww shit."

I chuckled, and he did too as I placed my hand on his shoulder. "We gon' get through it. A'ight?"

"A'ight."

I took a sip of my tea, also, then looked for Joyy. She was sitting at the table with my parents and Axton's parents. When she looked up at me, I winked at her. She reddened slightly then stood from her seat and tilted her head. I frowned slightly then remembered what she'd said. Her nasty ass was serious. I'd dig her ass out anywhere.

"Be right back," I said to Chad.

Without waiting for a response, I made my way to her and led her to the ladies' restroom. I quickly pulled her to the last stall as a woman scurried out. When I closed the door on that stall, I turned around and attacked her mouth as she undid my pants. She whipped my dick out with the quickness then sat on the toilet so she could suck him to his full potential. That shit didn't take long either. Feeling her lips slide down my shit and the warmth of her mouth got me there every time.

I pulled her up and had her stand on the toilet. I lifted her dress to her waist, only to see she wasn't wearing underwear. "Joyy, you can't be walking this mountain cat around without a leash. She too aggressive for that shit."

I kissed her mound then slid my fingers inside for a moment. She moaned softly, but that shit still echoed. I sucked my fingers clean then roughly picked her up and lowered her on my dick. Pressing her back against the wall of the stall, I beat that pussy, showing it who its master was, for all of five minutes, before we both exploded. She slid off my dick then sat on the toilet to suck him clean. *Shit!* "Joyy, you inciting round two right now," I said in a low voice.

She giggled as she let me escape from her monster suction. After wiping herself with toilet paper, she pulled her dress down and exited the stall. "For your information, Mr. Berotte, my 'leash' is in my purse. I forgot it at the table because my cat was on the run, and I had to chase after her."

I almost laughed too loud. Joyy was crazy for that one. I pulled her in my arms briefly and said, "I can't wait to get you home."

"I can't wait either."

When we walked out of the bathroom, Kaysyn and Brittany nearly walked right into us. Kaysyn's eyes narrowed as she stared at Joyy. "Nasty asses," she said, causing Brittany to chuckle.

Brittany had turned completely red. I could only laugh, because I wasn't the least bit embarrassed and Joyy didn't seem to be either. Before Kaysyn could disappear inside the bathroom, someone called her name. When I saw Seneca round the corner, I felt like some foul shit was going on. Kaysyn stopped while Brittany went inside. "What's up?" she asked nonchalantly.

Seneca glanced at us then turned to her. I went ahead and walked off because it seemed he wanted privacy, but not before seeing him yank Kaysyn to him by her hips and tongue the hell out of her. I stopped and stared like a deer in headlights. Kaysyn quickly pulled away from him, clearly in shock. "Now chill with the teasing or the next time I'm gon' kiss you with my dick."

He grabbed his dick, then walked off. We were all standing there in shock. Kaysyn was married with two kids. Why was she teasing Seneca? Furthermore, I didn't even know he was here. I didn't see him during the ceremony. That nigga was hellbent on fucking up somebody's happy life. I wasn't sure what Kaysyn had done that he took as her teasing him, but I sure in the hell was about to find out. I quickly walked away and caught up with him.

"Man, what was that shit?"

He stopped walking and turned around to face me. "She always fucking with me. I told Joyy I was gon' fuck her up if she didn't stop. Well, she must have wanted it because she didn't stop. She rubbed that fat ass all up on my dick when she could have walked around. I'm gon' fuck her life up. Be done made her forget she had a family. I'll be the side nigga though if that's what she wants. She fine as hell."

I slowly shook my head as he turned and walked away. Joyy had caught up with me by that time. "She is going to fuck up her marriage."

I turned to her and said, “You know what though? We can’t be concerned with their bullshit right now. Alexz and Axton are about to walk in any minute. I want you at the table with me. Fuck the wedding party. You in my party.”

She giggled as I pulled her close and kissed her neck. My dick was still on one in these tight ass pants, so she would have to walk in front of me so *I* wouldn’t be fucking up happy homes.



“THEY JUST ARRESTED LAMAR FOR ASSAULTING BRITTANY’S father,” Shy said as he stared at his phone.

“What?”

“Brittany’s ex-boyfriend assaulted her adopted father... his father. The police just arrested him.”

His phone had gone off back-to-back, alerting him of a text message. “Oh. I was confused as to who Lamar was. I suppose that’s a good thing.”

“Shit, I don’t even know anymore. It’s so much drama involved in that even I done lost track.”

“Did Alexz invite ol’ girl to her wedding?”

“Hell yeah. I told her she need to leave that shit alone. She had everybody on edge and shit.”

While Shy was irritated, I was relieved. It had been a couple of days since the wedding, and Alexz and Axton were honeymooning in Dubai. I’d come to his office and scooped him up for lunch. I’d just accepted that they were going to fire me. I didn’t know what they would conjure up, but apparently, they were desperate to find something since I’d been off for so long. An unknown number had been blowing my phone up, and I didn’t have a clue who it could have been. They refused to leave a message.

My curiosity almost had me succumbing to it though, because somebody was really trying to get at me for some

reason. When I turned into the parking lot of Richard's Café, Shy smiled big. I swore that nigga thought whenever he wasn't at work, he had to have that damned grill in. He even had DJ wearing a bottom grill now. I hoped they kept a toothbrush or Listerine on deck and kept that shit clean. The minute either one of their breaths stank, I was going to choke the shit out of them.

Anyway, Shy loved soul food, so I knew he would be in heaven the minute we arrived.

"Nigga, I ain't gon' wanna do shit when I get back to the office but take a nap."

I chuckled as we got out of my truck. "Well, now that Alexz's wedding is over, have you and Brittany discussed a date?"

"Naw. I mean, we discussed coming up with one, but we never did. She need to hurry up before I put a baby in her. She wants to be married before we have a baby, but Mariena got me feverish. I'm liable to produce triplets right now."

If I would have had anything in my mouth, I would have spit it out or choked on it. I laughed loudly, causing Shy to laugh too. "Nigga, you stupid as hell. I feel that though. Now that I have Joyy back and we're doing well, I'm ready as hell."

"How's her counseling and AA meetings going?"

I frowned slightly, trying to figure out how he knew that shit, but I quickly remembered who I was talking to. Shy knew every damn thing. "She's doing really well. She enjoys the AA meetings. Counseling has been tough for her though. She's been having to rehash a lot, so we talk it out more when she gets done. She realized that, subconsciously, she has a problem with men abandoning her. First her father and then me... It broke her. Now that I'm not at work, I have plenty of time on my hands to help her process shit. The counselor only has so much time allotted for her sessions."

"That's good, man. I wish y'all the best," he said as we walked through the door of the restaurant.

The smell assaulted our good senses and had us damn near salivating like hungry dogs. All talking ceased until we'd ordered our food. After walking over to the side to wait to get our plates, I asked, "You think this shit with Chad will wrap up soon?"

"Honestly, I think it will. From what intel says, our names were only on a list Knowledge had. We aren't significant enough to the terrorist group to worry about. Knowledge was trying to blame them for going after Alexz and Chad, but that was on him. Those people ain't worried about us. They got bigger fish to fry. My only concern is his wife. Although Alexz invited her, something about her bothers me."

"Me too. She stared at me too much."

"Nigga, that's cause she wanna fuck. The way she was looking at you ain't had shit to do with Knowledge. That was personal. She would have been down for restroom action just like Joyy. Nasty asses. Shit, I wanted to take Brittany in there too, but she said no."

I chuckled. "Man, I hurried to that restroom before Joyy changed her mind. That spontaneous shit is the best."

"Who you telling? People were whispering about y'all in there fucking and all the moaning y'all were doing."

"You a damn lie!"

He laughed. "Yeah, I'm lying. I was going to the restroom and really did hear y'all asses. With how fast you took off from the table, I knew your nose had caught ahold to her scent. Them pheromones wasn't playing wit' yo' ass."

"Shut up, Shy. That woman know she got all of me. For real. I'd marry her tomorrow, but I know she ain't quite ready. That reminds me. I need to ask her about Seneca."

"Uh huh. That nigga had droves of women after his thuggish ass. Lexi and Kaysyn were watching him for sure. Kaysyn rubbed her ass on him."

"So he wasn't lying about that. He kissed her in front of the bathroom."

Shy shook his head. “That nigga ain’t gon’ stop until somebody fuck him up.”

“He’s bold, that’s for sure.”

“Yep. Ain’t scared of shit. That’s why I okayed for him to be on our team to keep us safe. He’ll fuck somebody up in a minute, or at least try. The only dangerous part is that sometimes he don’t think shit through enough. It’s that street mentality. Ali gotta get some sense into him, then he’ll be dangerous in a whole notha way.”

“I hope he can get it together, for Joyy’s sake if for nothing else. I feel like he stresses her out more than he’s helping her. She loves him to death, and if something happened to him, it would be hard for her. Their mother is supposed to be coming to town this coming weekend, so hopefully she’s more like Joyy and not like Seneca.”

“No shit. I don’t want to have to fuck up a woman, but I will when it comes to y’all and Brittany.”

He didn’t crack a smile, so I knew he was serious. Hopefully, Ms. Roberts came here with some sense. Joyy seemed happy that she was coming, so hopefully everything would be okay, and she would fit right in with Mama Nissa, Ms. Patricia, and Ms. Shirl.

CHAPTER 16



Joyy

“IT’S SO GOOD TO SEE YOU, MAMA. HOW HAVE YOU BEEN?”

“I’m good! I’m glad to be here. Are you moving?”

“Yeah. Isaiah has a three-bedroom house. There’s no point in me paying rent here when I’m always at his place anyway.”

“I see,” she said dryly.

My mama had come to town for the weekend, and just by her response to me moving in with Isaiah, I could see that we would be further discussing this.

I continued to the kitchen and got us some water. We’d gone out to dinner when she met me at my job, and we were just getting here. Isaiah was going out with his brothers tonight. I knew I would be okay since my mom was here. At least I thought I would be. If she started stressing me out, then I didn’t know. When I got back to the front, I handed her the water.

“Thank you, baby.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Joyy... umm... do you think moving in with him so soon is the right thing to do? Y’all have only been back together for what? Two or three weeks?”

“Three weeks, but we aren’t *back* together. We were never a couple the first time. We’re a couple this time.”

She waved me off. “That’s not the point.”

“It is the point. Last time he didn’t owe me his loyalty. He didn’t owe me a thing, honestly. There was no commitment between us. We were two people just having fun that got caught up. That was on me for getting all bent out of shape when he didn’t give me something I never said I wanted. He wasn’t a mind reader, and I behaved immaturely about our situation. I should have told him how I felt about him and that I wanted him to stick around.”

“Despite everything you said, regardless of a relationship or not, sometimes it’s beneficial to take your time, baby. That’s all I’m saying. What if he’s not everything you think he is? Then you’ll be stuck trying to find another place to live.”

“No, I won’t be. Seneca is going to keep this place since he’s doing some work for someone out here. I’m only moving clothes and personal items. All the furniture, appliances, and most of the dishes are staying. Isaiah is everything I know he is and more. If it weren’t for him, I would still be drinking myself into a stupor. While I’m grateful for Sen’s support, his attitude and foolishness only makes me want to drink more.”

“Hmm.”

She looked away from me, and it irritated me somewhat. “Just say it.”

She turned back to me. Her eyes spoke volumes. I could see her love for me in them, so I calmed my attitude down. She was worried about me. “I’m just worried about you, baby. I don’t want you to get hurt. That’s all.”

I put my arm around her and leaned my head against hers. “Don’t worry. I’m in good hands. When you meet Zay, you’ll understand. He’s cooking for us tomorrow night at his house. He wanted me to have time alone with you today since we haven’t seen one another in a while. Otherwise, he would have been here today. He’s hanging out with his brothers.”

“How many brothers does he have?”

“Three biological, two stepbrothers, and two brothers-in-law. His sister married Kaysyn’s brother.”

“Oh yeah. That’s right. You told me that.”

“They get together from time to time and hang out. I doubt Axton is back yet. He and his bride went to Dubai.”

“Oh wow. Fancy. Well, I’m going to try to trust that he’s as great as you claim.”

“Trust, if Seneca likes him, then you should know that he’s amazing.”

“Right. I keep forgetting that fool is here.”

“He’s here starting shit. He got into it with Isaiah’s brother about his lady friend his first weekend here.”

“Lord have mercy.”

“Right.”

We continued to talk and have a good time catching up on everything, until Seneca walked in and scooped Mama up like he hadn’t seen her in years. I rolled my eyes at their dramatics. He was definitely a mama’s boy. “Don’t hate, old muscle headed girl.”

“Shut up.”

He pushed me in my head as he made his way to the kitchen to rummage through my refrigerator. My phone rang, and I just knew it was Isaiah. When I saw Kaysyn’s number, I answered. “Hey! What’s up?”

“I fucked up. Shit! I fucked up.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I already knew what had happened. That was why Sen was so fucking happy. “Kay... no. Calm down. Please calm down.”

“Luckey and I got into a big argument, and I called him. I shouldn’t have even allowed him to program his number in my phone. Joyy, what am I gonna do now?”

“You’re going to go somewhere and relax so you can think clearly. Was what you and Luckey got into it about that

serious? Think about what you want.”

She took deep breaths and sniffled as I shot daggers at Seneca. He got on my fucking nerves. She should have been off limits, but I knew there was no such thing as off limits to a nigga like him, unless she was related. I wondered if even that would stop him sometimes. I stood while putting the phone on mute then turned to my mama. “Give me five minutes, Mama.”

“Okay.”

I un-muted the phone then walked to my bedroom and nearly tripped over a box as I entered. “Shit!”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I tripped. What were you and Luckey into it about?”

“His frivolous spending. Our weekly argument about money. It just seemed to really get bad this time. He pushed me to the bed and cursed me out, saying that he works and should be able to spend money as he pleased. I just don’t know what to do about him. I love my husband, and I really want us to work, but if we can’t get this together, it won’t.”

“I’m sorry, Kay. Do you have a separate bank account?”

“I do, but if he spends half his check, we don’t have money to save after paying the bills. Last week, our joint account actually went negative. Can you believe that? We both make six figures a year, my car is paid off, and we don’t have stupid bills. Most of them are necessities. We should be able to save two grand a month, at least! This is just so damn hard. I’ve been taking my lunch just so I won’t have to spend money on food. How pathetic is that?”

“Have y’all considered counseling? Do y’all talk about the bills?”

“He won’t hear of counseling. I brought that up tonight. He said as long as all the bills are being paid, I shouldn’t have a thing to say. So what happens if we need a new washer or dryer? We’ve had them for ten years. What if, God forbid, one of the kids get hurt? Or any other unforeseen circumstances

arise? We'll be up a creek without a paddle. What I did with Seneca tonight only made things worse for me."

"Shit, Kay. That nigga don't want shit but whatever you have to offer."

"That's all I wanted from him too. The worst part is that he didn't disappoint. That's going to make it even harder to stay away from him."

"TMI. T-fucking-MI."

"I'm sorry, Joyy. I'll figure this shit out. I know your mom is in town, so I'll let you go."

"Shit, Kay. I don't know what else to say. Go home and keep yo' fucking cat to yourself."

"Bye."

I ended the call and took a deep breath as I headed back to the front with my mama. I wanted to walk up to Seneca and punch him in his god damn throat. He was sitting on the other side of Mama. I sat where I was before as I shot daggers his way. He gave me a smirk, no doubt knowing who I was on the phone with.

"Everything okay with Kaysyn?"

"Yes, ma'am. Her and Luckey are having some issues."

"She should have had an issue with his name," Seneca said.

"Says a nigga named Seneca." I shot back, then glanced at my mama. "Sorry, Mama."

"You don't like his name, Joyy?"

"I mean, I wouldn't name my child that. But he isn't mine, thank God. I would have killed his ass by now. As long as you like it, then that's all that matters."

"I was probably delirious from the epidural when I named him. I don't even know where the hell that name came from."

I hollered with laughter while Seneca sat there with a stank face. "India, for real? That's how you gon' do me?" he asked.

“Well, I mean, what you want me to say? I’m telling the truth. You want me to lie?”

“Hell yeah. You could have waited until I left the room or something. Shit, I like my name, especially for my formal profession.”

“Former, nigga. Former profession.”

“Slip of the tongue. Ask yo’ friend,” he said with a wink as I frowned. “Shut up, Joyy. You know that’s what I meant. It sounds like cynical... just add an L at the end and that’ll be exactly what it is. Niggas took that seriously on the streets. So there. Y’all get off my shit.”

“Leave then. We’re about to watch a movie.”

“What y’all finna watch?”

“Something you ain’t. Bye!”

He stood from his seat and let us be. I put on *Harriet* since Mama hadn’t seen it yet as Seneca walked back up front. “I guess I’ll go get in some trouble.”

I rolled my eyes as my mama slowly shook her head and said, “Be careful, Senecal.”

We burst into laughter as he slammed the door.



WHEN I TURNED INTO ISAIAH’S DRIVEWAY, I TURNED AND smiled at my mama. She smiled back, and we got out of the car. I’d missed Isaiah so much I was willing to leave my mama in his house and go to the car and fuck the shit out of him. I hadn’t seen him since Friday morning when I left for work... well, except for the FaceTime call. He called me last night when he got home, and my ass talked him into phone sex. I guessed it should be called video sex.

It had been a couple of weeks since we’d gone a day without seeing one another. Since he was cooking for dinner, I took the time to take my mom to the nail salon to get a mani-pedi, we went to lunch, and we did some shopping. By the

time we went back to my place and put our things away, it was time to head to Isaiah's. All the walking had definitely awakened our appetites. He'd asked what type of foods my mom liked, and I gave him some of the things I remembered, so I was excited to see what he chose to cook.

I wanted to run to the door and hop in his arms, and had she not been with me, I would have. Then we would have had dessert before dinner as we tended to do. I chuckled at the thought of doing that shit anyway. As I rang the doorbell, she asked, "What's funny?"

"Nothing. I'm just excited."

She smiled big as we waited for Isaiah to open the door. I felt like a kid in a candy store whenever I was around Isaiah. My excitement was a real thing I felt with him, although that wasn't what had me chuckling. The locks disengaged, and Isaiah opened the door with a huge smile on his face. I immediately went to him, hugging him around his waist then tilting my head back for a kiss. After he kissed me softly, I turned to my mother to see a smile on her face. "Mama, this is Isaiah Berotte. Zay, this is my mama, India Roberts."

He smiled and stretched out his hand for a handshake. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Roberts. Y'all come on in."

"It's a pleasure to meet you also, Mr. Berotte."

Isaiah frowned slightly then chuckled. "Isaiah is perfectly fine."

"And so is India," my mom responded.

He smiled and led us to the couch. "Have a seat, ladies. Dinner is almost ready."

"Do you need any help?" I asked.

He licked his lips then bit his bottom one as my mom sat on the couch. I swore he was communicating with my mountain cat, as he'd called her. "Naw, baby. Relax. I got it. I just have to slide the yeast rolls in the oven."

"What did you cook?"

"You'll see in a minute, nosy," he said as he walked away.

I flopped on the couch, already feeling a way about being so close to him yet so far. When I came over, it was rare that we were more than three feet apart unless one of us had to use the bathroom. That man had me spoiled as hell. “It smells so good in here, Isaiah. I can’t wait to see what you’ve prepared.”

“Thank you.”

I shoulder bumped her as I twisted my face to the side. “Why you being all proper?” I whispered.

She reddened and whispered back, “I want to make a great first impression. Besides, he’s proper.”

“That’s his work voice. He’ll lighten up in a minute.”

“What y’all whispering about over there?”

“See?” I probed, causing us both to giggle.

He came and pulled me from the couch and sat then allowed me to sit on his lap. I was surprised he did that in front of my mom, but I suppose there was no sense in hiding anything at our age. He kissed my cheek then addressed my mama.

“Joyy gave me a list of foods you love, so I chose to cook fettucine alfredo with grilled chicken breast and shrimp. I did a side salad and yeast rolls to go along with it.”

“Wow. Thank you. Did you make your sauce from scratch?”

He frowned like he was insulted, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. My baby cooked everything from scratch. He stayed on TikTok looking for ideas. My mom’s eyebrows lifted. “I don’t use that store bought mess for my alfredo sauce. Homemade is my preference for everything I cook. Excuse my language, but it has to be damn good for me to use anything from the box, can, or package.”

“Well excuse me, Chef Boyar-Zay!” my mama said then laughed.

We all laughed at her response. That proper tone went right out the window. Zay stared at her for a minute longer like he was trying to figure something out, but the timer on the oven

went off. “The rolls are ready. Y’all come to the table so I can serve you.”

I stood so he could stand as well. He looked damn good in his jeans and short-sleeved polo-styled shirt. Normally, when I came over, he only wore sweats or basketball shorts. I guess he knew he’d better wear something where his dick couldn’t easily be seen if he got aroused. I helped my mom from the couch and went to the kitchen as he placed the pan of rolls on the stove. Before I could touch the chair, he made long strides our way and pulled out our chairs for us.

“Thank you, Isaiah,” my mama voiced.

I kissed his lips as a form of thanks then sat. He pushed us in one at a time then went back to the stove and fixed our plates. When he returned with our plates, I was literally salivating. “Oh my God, Zay. This looks so good. You didn’t say you added broccoli.”

He smiled and said, “Thanks, babe.”

Once he set our plates down, he went back for glasses of tea, then once again returned for his food and drink. After sitting across from me, he stretched out his hands for ours so he could bless the food. I couldn’t even close my eyes. The food had my undivided attention. The second he said “Amen,” I stuck my fork in it. He chuckled when I put the first forkful in my mouth and moaned.

My mama turned to me with a frown on her face. “Does she always do this when you cook, Isaiah?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he chuckled.

She slowly shook her head then ate some too. When she moaned as well, I nearly choked. My mama was a character. Isaiah laughed, but when he stopped, he tilted his head as he stared at my mama. His eyes widened slightly as he probably figured out whatever it was he was thinking. After eating a little bit, he looked nervous. He glanced at me, knowing I was watching him and his mannerisms. He cleared his throat. “Ms. India, are you related to a woman named Bridget Zeno, by chance?”

Aww shit.

CHAPTER 17



Isaiah

I'D BEEN TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHO JOYY'S MOTHER LOOKED like since they'd gotten here. It had been bothering me since I'd first laid eyes on her. Her face was so damn familiar to me. It finally hit me while we were eating, and it caused my skin to crawl. I did my best to keep flashes of that damned video from entering my mind. When I asked if she was related to Bridget Zeno, she looked like she wanted to throw up. Joyy had a look of disgust on her face as well.

"She's my sister, unfortunately."

I damn near swallowed my tongue. *Her sister?* How could a woman so fucking evil be related to this angel? Ms. India had been polite, friendly, all of that in my presence this evening. She exhibited that she was educated on proper etiquette and language before relaxing into her everyday verbiage. She was funny and quick witted. I loved that, especially when she pretended to be disturbed by Joyy's moaning then turned around and did the same thing.

"How do you know Aunt Bridget, Zay?" Joyy asked with a frown.

I gave her a look without saying. "Aww shit. This is unreal," she said, quickly figuring out what my silence meant.

I'd called my job this morning after Joyy left only to find out that they'd reached a decision and would be calling me in

for a meeting to discuss their findings. They hadn't found shit. However, they'd probably made up something to let me go. I wanted to call CPS so bad to see what had happened. However, when Ms. India opened her mouth, I knew I wouldn't have to.

“CPS just took her daughter from her. According to evidence, they found that Bridget's boyfriend has been raping her. She's pregnant with his baby. I feel so sorry for her. I tried to take her in years back when Bridget was on the streets, but she wouldn't turn her loose. Her best option was to let that child go, but that would be relinquishing her benefits. CPS would investigate and leave her right there in the house with her evil ass.”

I lowered my head and shook it slowly as Ms. India continued. “Isaiah, I know that you're a counselor for the health department. You know my niece, don't you?”

I lifted my head and nodded. “I do. She's a sweet girl. Really quiet though.”

“That's because her damn mother threatens her all the time. That shit pisses me off. Sorry, Isaiah. It just hurts my heart. The state failed her, and there's no telling how many other children they've failed from poor investigations. My sister lived in a one-bedroom sharp-shooter, and J'Niya had to sleep on an old, tattered couch.”

I frowned slightly. I didn't have the slightest clue what she was talking about. Apparently, she could see the confusion on my face. “My grandmother used to call them sharp shooters.” She rolled her eyes. “It's those houses where you walk in the front door and can see the back door. It's a straight shot from the front to the back.”

“Oh.”

We all kind of picked over our food after that. I hated I'd even brought it up while we were eating. This alfredo was off the damn chain. “I have to-go containers if y'all need one.”

“I'm sorry, baby. This is so good. I'm more than sure you could tell by my moan. Talks of Aunt Bridget soured on my

damn stomach.”

“Mine too. It was an amazing meal. You’re an excellent cook,” her mom cosigned.

“Thank you. I have banana pudding too.”

“You are too good to me, babe.”

I chuckled as I stood from the table and grabbed their plates to box their food. There had to be something I could do to help J’Niya. It just wasn’t fair that some kids had to endure so much. They turned out to be parents like Bridget. I wondered if something like this had happened to her that Ms. India wasn’t aware of? I turned to look behind me and saw that they were talking quietly. I was more than sure they were discussing J’Niya and Bridget’s inability to even be a decent human being.

As I closed the lid on the first box, my phone rang in my pocket. When I checked it, I saw a call from an unknown number. This was getting ridiculous. Cell phone companies released people’s phone numbers to solicitors and now it was worse than having a land line. Any and everybody could call with bullshit. I silenced it then noticed a missed call from Alexz. While they were occupied, I called her back.

“Hello?”

“What’s up Alexz with a Z? Y’all made it back?”

“Not yet. Our flight leaves in a couple of hours. I wanted to see if you would be available to pick us up from the airport. We won’t land until noon on Sunday.”

“Yeah. I could get y’all. What happened to Chad picking y’all up?”

“He said something came up and he couldn’t do it. I know Dad will be busy cooking, and I didn’t want to ask Dylan. Shy and Brittany went on an overnight getaway. They won’t be back until tomorrow evening.”

“No worries, baby girl. I got’chu.”

“Thanks, Zay. See you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I ended the call then continued boxing food. Maybe we could do something to get their minds off Bridget’s trifling ass. If Joyy wasn’t a recovering alcoholic, this would have been the perfect time to have a healthy sized drink.



“MR. BEROTTE, WE JUST WANT TO CUT TO THE CHASE. There’s no sense in beating around the bush.”

I was sitting in the conference room at my job. Surprisingly, I was cool. I was expecting them to fire me, and I would be okay with that. When I walked in and saw the big boss, I knew my time here would end today. They would be the ones who fucked up a good thing. I knew my worth, and I was tired of accepting bullshit as payment for what I offered. The way I helped these young people that came through here was my payment. If I had to put a price on what I did, they wouldn’t be able to pay me.

I looked around the table at the big wigs present and wondered if they thought I’d done something illegal or some shit. There was no need for all their asses to be here. My direct supervisor wasn’t even here. I straightened my jacket a bit as I sat back in my chair, waiting to see what he had to say.

“We fired Nigel Morris, and we would like to offer you the position he once held. You’ve been an asset to this department, and we discovered he was taking credit for the accomplishments you made and hiding his mess ups. There were a few cases where you’d recommended a call to CPS that were never followed through. One of those, the child died. He is directly responsible for that and will suffer swift consequences. Ms. J’Niya Alfred has been placed in a group home and is still due to deliver her baby in a month or so. She has an appointment to see you today.”

I was speechless. Here I thought I was about to get fired. I’d been on suspension for over two weeks. I wasn’t upset

about it. Since I was still getting compensated, it was like an extended vacation, but I just knew they would be coming to me with bullshit today. I frowned slightly, trying to process it all. That muthafucka was gonna throw me under the bus. Like Miss Celie had said in *The Color Purple*, the grave he planned for me, was the one he was gonna rot in.

I stared at them in shock for a moment. I didn't know whether I even wanted the position or not. I was trying to quickly filter through the ups and downs in my head. Taking this position didn't mean I had to be in it forever. The hours weren't nearly as strict as my current position. I could start my own office while working here. Looking around the table at all the hopeful eyes, I remained quiet for a little longer.

Sensing my hesitancy, Mr. Holder continued. "As you know, the position allows you to create your own schedule. There would be a significant pay increase, four weeks of vacation, and freedom to implement programs you feel are vital to the department. Budget costs would have to be discussed, but if they aren't too extreme, they'll most likely be approved. You have the credentials, and during this investigation, we found that Mr. Morris lacked those credentials, which no longer qualified him for the position anyway. Please tell us you accept."

"I can't make a decision like this without further thought. Can I let you know before the week is out?"

"Of course. We wouldn't want you to take this decision lightly, but we are hoping that you will fill it. Him suspending you only put a spotlight on you and him for that matter. His notes weren't aligning with your case notes. It's time for you to fulfill your purpose, Mr. Berotte. Whether that's here or somewhere else, you are destined for this."

I simply nodded. When they all stood, I stood, too, and shook their hands. This was unbelievable, and I couldn't wait to tell Joyy and my dad about it. They'd been the most worried. Alexz had asked about it when I picked them up. She was glowing and sick at the same time. Her pregnancy was already wearing her out. She had an appointment this week to find out how far along she was. Axton was the perfect

husband, she'd told me. Their first day in Dubai had been spent in their suite because she was throwing up the entire day. She said it was like her body hated flying.

Once the first day passed, she said she was just fine. She recalled all the things they'd seen, places they'd gone, and of course, the food they'd eaten. They had to pay extra to get all the things they'd bought back. I was proud of her and all that she'd accomplished. She knew quickly what love was supposed to feel like and acted on it. While I knew early on, I fucked it up, and here I was, practically thirty-six years old, just getting back to it.

God had a funny way of doing things sometimes. I didn't always understand, but I knew it had to be for a reason. That reason could be far above my level of comprehension. Things seemed to be turning around for good, and I couldn't be happier about that.

As I exited the room, I walked right into Chanell. *Shit.* "I'm sorry, Mr. Berotte," she said as she nervously looked around.

"It's okay, Chanell. You good?"

She shook her head. "They told me you were suspended, and I felt like my chances of getting my shit together was slipping away from me."

She broke out in tears as Mr. Holder stood and watched from afar. I was sure he wanted to watch how I would handle this situation, not knowing of my connection to this woman. "Chanell, don't cry. What's going on?"

"I've been calling you, but I couldn't even get my shit together long enough to leave a message. I've been clueless about who could possibly be the father of my child. Although I was cheating on my husband, I thought I was being careful. I was sure that he was the father of my son... Nixon. I had another DNA test done against the DNA they already had for Luke in the system. Turns out, he *is* the father. Those muthafuckas ruined my life! Luke and I would have still been married. Dylan wouldn't have gone through all that bullshit with me. I would still have my job."

She fell against me as she sobbed. She was probably the unknown number that was blowing me up. I gently rubbed her shoulder and pulled away slightly. “Come on. Let’s go sit in the office and talk.”

She nodded as she tried to compose herself. I could tell she’d been tormented by that revelation. Chanell was always pretty put together. No one would ever guess that she was as ratchet as she was from the looks of her. She looked bourgeois as hell. Today, that was far from the case. She only wore jeans and a T-shirt, and her hair was slightly disheveled.

Once we entered the glass office, I pulled out a chair for her to sit. Instead of walking around to sit on the other side of the desk, I sat next to her.

I grabbed her hand as I recalled all the bullshit Dylan told me she’d gone through, especially with her adopted father. “Everything happens for a reason. Had that not happened, Dylan would probably still be messing around and missed out on his forever. So don’t worry about how this affected him. Luke is an entirely different story. You didn’t need to be tied down to a man like that anyway. He was arrogant, self-centered, and cruel.”

I knew all that about Luke just from counseling him on several occasions. He hadn’t been back here in months, so I didn’t know if he was on the street or actually doing better. “But for you? All of this made you face your issues head on. It made you see that you needed help. Don’t regret any of this. Am I saying let the hospital or whoever is responsible for screwing up the DNA results off scot-free? Absolutely not. Go after them. Asking Shy to do it would be a long shot, but you can find another reputable lawyer that will get the job done. I know a lady that will probably take your case on pro-bono. I’ll give you her contact info before you leave.”

I gently rubbed her back as I said, “The question is, how do we get Chanell on the right path? I feel there are some issues that you need to address. What are some things that are going on in your life at this very moment that need to change?”

“Whitman.”

“Whitman?”

“Yes. He’s controlling my life. He’s my biological mother’s friend’s husband. He and his wife, Ramona, raised me. He started molesting me when I was eleven. Now he controls me with money and threats to expose what we’ve been doing. Although I know that he started this shit with me when I was just a kid, I’m grown now. I can stop this at any time, but I’m afraid of having to fend for myself with a toddler. I can’t find a job to save my life, even with my degree in education. It’s like I’ve been black balled. No district will hire me. I honestly don’t want to work fast food. I know I may not have a choice, but shit. How am I gonna take care of Nixon on that salary?”

“Let’s get back to Whitman. Sometimes exposure heals. Confronting him about what he’s been doing to you for all these years right in front of Ramona is what may be needed. You’re going to have to let go of that fear for the sake of you and your son. That’s the only way the healing process can begin, Chanell. You have to confront the source. Once that’s done, you can start to tackle everything else, like your need for validation through sex. That’s an ugly monster that he created.”

“I know.” She took a deep breath and exhaled through her nose. “Thank you, Isaiah. Can I continue coming here to talk to you? Will it be a conflict of interest?”

“You can continue to come, Chanell. I’m bound by law to keep your business between me and you. Whether you choose to divulge what we discuss is on you, but I can’t. Let me get my calendar so we can schedule your next appointment.”

I stood from my seat and walked around my desk to check my availability. We scheduled her next appointment, where we could have a full session, then I stood from my seat to walk her out. When I did, I noticed Mr. Holman was still standing there watching. Chanell extended her hand, and I grabbed it and shook it.

“You don’t have to do this, but you are. That lets me know just how big your heart is. Thank you, Isaiah.”

“No problem, Chanell. Don’t forget what’s on your to-do list. Call me if you need me, but leave a message so I know to call you back. See you next week.”

“I will. See you next week.”

When she left the office, seemingly in better spirits, Mr. Holman approached me. “And that’s why we need you. That woman was falling apart, and you helped her get it back together just that quickly. I’m willing to add up to thirty grand to that salary increase to keep you here with us. So don’t let money be the reason to not accept the job.”

He shook my hand and left the building as I stood there watching him. My coworker, Rozalyn, smiled at me as she escorted a young lady to her office. I was more than sure that the moment she got a break, she would be coming to my office to talk. I knew she had inside information on what went on around here while I was gone, and I was definitely curious as to how things changed.

Before I could make my way back to my office, I saw J’Niya and a white lady walk through the door. When she saw me, she ran to me, big belly and all. That shit scared me, because I didn’t want her to fall. I quickly wrapped my arms around her to prevent any mishaps. She was bawling her eyes out. However, I knew it wasn’t a pain induced cry. It was tears of gratefulness and joy.

She pulled away from me as the lady with her had a seat in the waiting area. We went to the office, and she whispered, “I know it was you. You were the only one who noticed and seemed to care.”

I didn’t acknowledge what she said, because there were cameras everywhere. I never admitted that I was the one who anonymously called CPS, although I believed they suspected it. “How are you doing? I heard the state removed you and placed you in a group home.”

“I’m doing better. They want me to start counseling, and I told them I didn’t want to see anyone but you. Had it not been for you, I don’t know where I would be.”

She looked down at her belly then rubbed her hand over it. “I’m not keeping the baby. I’m placing her for adoption. She has to have better opportunities than me. I can’t take care of her, and now that I have nowhere to live, I surely can’t take care of her. I want to be a teenager and have fun at school with my friends. I want to be a normal kid. I mean, I know I’ll never be normal now, but I want to be as close to it as possible.”

“For the record, you’re so strong. You’ve endured the worst. I may have a proposition for you, but I don’t want to share that with you until I know for sure. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“So, since you’ve been quiet about what was going on... and I know that was because of your mom—”

“Bridget. She wasn’t a mother.”

“Okay. From now on I will refer to her as Bridget. I know she silenced you. I’m here to listen. We will talk about whatever you want to talk about today. Next time, we will start from the beginning so you can purge. It’s not going to be easy, but it will help in the long run. The cleansing of a wound never feels good during the process. You understand that?”

“Yes, sir. It’s gonna hurt to talk about all of it, but it will help me heal. I get it.”

I nodded my head, and we talked for the next thirty minutes about her hopes and dreams and how she was grateful that she had a chance to accomplish them now that she was away from Bridget. Hearing how hopeful she was only softened my heart even more. But the thing that softened me the most was when I found out her middle name was Marie. I knew at that point that I had to do something to help her, even if it meant I couldn’t accept the job they were offering.

CHAPTER 18



Joyy

I WAS SITTING AT MY DESK, THINKING ABOUT MY COUNSELING session. We'd covered so much ground today. I'd gone during my lunch break, and instead of it being difficult and traumatic like the week before last, it was eye-opening. Facing my abandonment issues was a hard one. Actually, talking about my father and his absence had helped me tremendously. She had me look at a random picture of a man and pretend he was my dad. I cursed that picture for filth and said everything to it that I would have said to my dad—words that I didn't realize had been holding me hostage.

I felt so free when I finished. It was like the shackles holding me had fallen off. This woman Isaiah had recommended was the truth, and I literally prayed while in her office, thanking God for using her and giving her the knowledge to help me. I cried and hugged her tight before I left. Then when I got to my car, I cried tears of joy because of the liberty I felt. I still had no desire to contact my father or find out where he'd been.

Things were going smoothly at work. O'Brien and I were getting along so much better. Now that I knew what his deal was, it was easy to make accommodations for him. I didn't realize how openly I used to display my irritation with him, because some of my coworkers noticed how well we were working together. I felt even worse for the way I had been

treating him. He assured me that it wasn't a big deal and that he should have told me what was going on with him.

I was sitting here counting down the minutes where I could go to see my man. Mama left Monday morning when I did, so I didn't really get to see him all weekend. I saw him last night, but I was tired from the weekend and packing. We'd only talked an hour before I fell asleep and didn't wake up until the next morning. I would be moving in with him this coming weekend, and I was beyond excited about it.

There was only an hour left in my day, and I wanted to skip out of here early. It wasn't like I got paid by the hour, because I surely didn't get paid extra when I stayed later or for those administrative meetings.

As I began shutting down my computer, my cell phone rang. When I saw Kaysyn's name flash across the screen, I answered. "Hey, sis! How's your day going?"

"Hey. It's going."

Aww shit. I already knew where this conversation was headed. Either she was still into it with Luckey, or Seneca's cynical ass was still into it with her. "Have you talked to Luckey again about what went down the other day?"

"Yeah. He's still in his same mindset, even after me explaining how we can't spend every dime we have. Honestly, I feel like something is going on that he isn't saying."

"Something like what?"

"Like maybe he's giving money to his mama or supporting some woman."

I rolled my eyes. "Do you think maybe you're suspecting him of taking care of another woman because you're sexually taking care of another man?"

I was taking a shot in the dark, but I was more than sure that she'd seen Seneca again. His ass didn't come home until Monday. He wasn't working with Ali all that time. "Seneca told you?" she asked softly.

“No. You just did. That nigga gon’ get you in a world of trouble. If you ain’t happy with Luckey, divorce his ass and move on.”

“I can’t do that. I love him despite what my actions say. I crave male interaction, someone to praise me and tell me how good I look. It’s not just about sex. I know that’s what Seneca wants though. My self-esteem has plummeted, and I know it’s because we run our house like a damn business partnership. The kids need him. I want to need him. Financially, he does help, but shit, I can do it by myself and be broke. It’s frustrating, Joyy.”

“If you are this unhappy, there’s only one thing to do. Mention it and see how he takes it. In this situation, someone is going to get hurt. Eventually, he’s going to find out what you’re doing. Then it’ll be too late. Do you want to lose your kids? He’ll demand full custody since you’ll be the one who messed up. Leave Seneca’s ass alone until you get your shit straight. If he agrees to the divorce and y’all separate, then have at it.”

“You’re right.”

“I don’t see what you see in his ass anyway.”

“You wouldn’t see it. You’re his sister.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, Joyy. You don’t wanna know that his dick game is addicting.”

“Hell naw!” I yelled then had to cover my mouth. “Girl, you got me in here getting loud as hell. I’m still at work.”

She died laughing and said, “I’m sorry. I already left for the day. My heart wasn’t in it.”

“Don’t let this turn into depression, Kay. You know I’m here for you. Whatever you need.”

“I know, baby. You know Shirlene gon’ be mad that I didn’t talk to her about this, but I know she’ll treat Luckey differently if I do. If we end up working things out, she gon’

still be pissed that there was even a problem, as if her and daddy got along all the time.”

“You ain’t telling me nothing I don’t already know. You’re their baby, their only daughter. Of course she’s going to be protective of you.”

“Yeah. Well, I have to go. I just got home. I’m going to try to talk to him again, because I refuse to bend on this. After that, I’m going to bring up divorce.”

“I’m sorry, Kay. I really am. Let me know how things go.”

“I will.”

I ended the call and felt bad for my friend. Besides the sex, maybe there was a side to Senecal that I didn’t know and would probably never know. I chuckled at the way I thought of his name now. It would be his new name, and he had no one to blame but himself. I grabbed my purse and my badge and was getting ready to lock up my office when O’Brien appeared in my doorway.

“I know you missed me since I ain’t been in your face in a while.”

I laughed and said, “I wouldn’t say missed, but it feels weird that you aren’t popping up in my doorway anymore.”

“I’ll try to visit twice a day. You leaving?”

“Yeah. It’s dead around here.”

“Well thanks to you, I’m leaving too. I’m able to finish my work quicker. I’ll walk you out.”

After locking my door, we walked to our cars, talking about different things we could possibly do with the curriculum to make it easier on teachers. They were overworked and underpaid. The least we could do was find ways to make teaching easier and more exciting for them. Once we reached our cars, he opened my door once I unlocked it and bid me a good evening. I quickly made my way to Isaiah’s. I had a few boxes and bags in my trunk to unload as well.

He'd told me to start bringing my things little by little and he would help me organize it so we didn't have to do all that at once this weekend. It made perfect sense. I would have waited then got overwhelmed with how much I had to do. My shit would have stayed in boxes and bags for weeks. When I turned in the driveway, Isaiah was outside. From the looks of it, he'd just gotten home. I'd almost gotten used to him being off. He was home over two weeks. By the smile on his face, I could assume that work went well.

He walked to the car to help me out, and the moment I stood, he pulled me in his arms. "Hey, baby. How was your day?" I asked.

"It was good. What about yours?"

"Good. My counseling session went great, so I was in a good mood for the rest of the day."

I'd told him the details of it as soon as I left. I was so excited about how it went I called him on my way back to work. "That's good, baby. Did you bring any of your things like I suggested?"

"Yes. They're in the trunk."

"Okay. Pop it for me, and I'll get some of it while I'm out here."

I did as he requested then went to the door to find it unlocked. He had probably unlocked it before I got here. I went inside and set my purse on the counter then went back outside to help him get my things inside. He quickly turned me back around and told me to relax. I could only chuckle at how great of a man I had. He was the perfect man for me.

Once he was done bringing things inside, he said, "Okay. Come with me to the couch."

I followed him, anxiously waiting to hear what he wanted to talk about. When I sat, he pulled me to his lap. "Now you know better."

I giggled then kissed his lips. Whenever we sat on the couch, I sat on his lap. As I sat straddling him, I could feel him

stiffening beneath me. “So, first, I was not only cleared of any wrongdoing, but I was offered the supervisor position.”

My eyes widened. “Wow! Baby, that’s amazing! Where does that leave room for starting your own business?”

“Well, I haven’t accepted it yet, because I’m still trying to weigh my options. I’m leaning more toward accepting the job, because there are two young women that refuse to see anyone else. To help them, I would sacrifice myself. One of those young women is your cousin. She came to see me today.”

Listening to how selfless this man was had me feeling softer than cotton. “Baby, that’s so beautiful. Don’t make me cry.”

He smiled. “If I accept the job, it doesn’t mean I have to stay there forever. I think there’s a five-year contract. Then I can take my time and build my own facility during that time. But who knows? I may thrive as the supervisor. I pretty much have free reign. I can implement different programs and everything.”

“Wow. I’m so proud of you.”

I kissed his lips, and he gripped my ass roughly. He knew that made me gush every time. “Stop getting me sidetracked. There’s something I wanna ask you.”

I smiled then sat up and slowly rolled my hips. He frowned playfully then gripped me at my waist to make me stop. “J’Niya is in a group home. I want her to have a semblance of family. Do you think your mom would take her in? If she doesn’t want to, I would love to take her in.”

Tears filled my eyes at how Isaiah was touching my heart. I put my hands to his face, staring into his eyes. “Either way, J’Niya will have somewhere to go then. I’ll ask Mama. I think she could use the company. She said she’s tired of the turnup and that she hadn’t missed out on shit.”

He chuckled as he rubbed my thighs. “I feel good about today. I got a promotion, I helped two young women in the process, and the love of my life is moving into our home. I purchased this house with you in mind. You are the only

woman I imagined sharing it with, Joyy. You never left my heart, baby.”

“And you never left mine. I love you so much.”

“I love you too. Call your mom and ask her before we get cranked up and you forget. I want to be able to tell J’Niya something when she comes back tomorrow.”

I giggled and pulled my phone from my bra. That alone had Isaiah readier than a fresh battery. He pulled my shirt over my head as I placed the phone call. He slid his hands over my belly and love handles as my mama answered the phone.

“Hey, Joyy! How was your day?”

“Hey, Mama. It was good. How about yours?”

“It was good. I didn’t do anything but cook and watch TV.”

“I have a question for you.”

“Okay. What’s that?”

“Remember what we talked about at the dinner table at Isaiah’s house while he was boxing our food?”

“Yeah. I was saying how I wished I would have tried harder to get J’Niya away from Bridget.”

“Well, how would you feel about taking her in now? I mean, I’m sure she’s due to have her baby soon, and taking care of her and a baby might be a little taxing, but—”

“I’ll take her.”

“Hey, Ms. India,” Zay interrupted.

“Hey, Zay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But listen. She’s giving the baby up for adoption. She said she wants the baby to have a better chance in life than she did, and she just wants to be a kid. I can imagine that it would be hard on her to raise the baby of her rapist as well. However, I would be prepared just in case she changes her mind when the baby is born. The state will compensate you. If you’d like, she can live here until the baby

is born. She's due in like three weeks. You can stay here, too, if you want until then."

I allowed the tears to fall down my cheeks as I listened to Zay be the best man I'd ever known. There was only one person that taught him how to be a man, and he was just as great, but I'd like to think that he inherited his soft heartedness from his mother. I was also willing to bet that J'Niya's middle name had only softened him more. I didn't think about her middle name until now. She had his mother's name.

I tuned back in to their conversation to hear my mama say, "Okay, Zay. Let me know what she says. I'm going to start packing, because I feel like she'll be receptive."

"Yes, ma'am. I will."

"Joyy, I'll talk to you later, baby."

"Okay, Mama. Love you."

"Love you more."

When I ended the call, Isaiah took the phone from me and set it on the couch. "Tonight, you gon' handle me. I want you to ride this dick like you a professional jockey, girl. Let me feel every groove in that pussy like every inch of it was made for my pleasure."

He unfastened my bra and went straight to my nipples. The contrast of his brown skin tone against my light, damn near yellow skin tone always turned me on. And that had been since day one. I was made for him, just like he was made for me. That was why neither of us could effectively move on. Our spirits wouldn't settle without the other. I was so at peace right now. That was how I knew without a shadow of a doubt that here was where I was meant to be.

CHAPTER 19



*J*saiah

“IF YOU KNOW THAT EVERYTHING IS GOOD, THEN WHY ARE YOU still holding Lexi at a distance?”

I’d come to Chad’s house because the women had taken over my home. They were having a sleepover. J’Niya was feeling miserable. She was due in a week and always tired. Joyy called Kaysyn and her daughter over, and there was no way that all that would go down without Alexz. Before I knew it, Skyler, Lexi, Mama Nissa, Brittany, Ms. Shirl, and Ms. Patricia were at my house. Our days of only having Alexz to deal with were over.

Alexz said she could sympathize with J’Niya since she was pregnant too and that Skyler could talk them both through it. She’d gone to the doctor last week and found out she was fourteen weeks. She cried like a baby when she told me. She was past the stage of gestation she had been with the baby she aborted. Not long after she dried her tears, she had to run to the bathroom to throw up. She had to be having a stubborn ass little girl.

I was sure Joyy invited the matriarchs to keep Ms. India company. Although Ms. India was slightly younger than they were, she was close enough to where there wouldn’t be any age challenges. She was really close to Ms. Patricia’s age than anybody else’s though. While it had only been two weeks since J’Niya and Ms. India had gotten there, I’d gotten used to

my house being full, just like I'd always wanted it. Once they left, Joyy and I would have to start working on filling it again.

I watched Chad gulp his Patrón like I hadn't asked him a question. He didn't have to say it for me to know, but I still liked him to say shit aloud so he could admit to himself what was going on with him. I knew he was still beyond paranoid. Who wouldn't be? Knowledge wasn't even in the same facility with him, because they'd sent him off to New Orleans, but he didn't know if Knowledge had filled anyone in on his intentions and how to carry them out.

Of all my brothers, I knew him the best. We grew up together, only two years apart. He was my best friend. Wherever I went, he went and vice versa. Wherever we went, we always heard, *that's Sheldon and Marie's boys*. We heard it so often, we started calling ourselves that. Before we moved into the house that Dad lives in now, Chad and I shared a room. He wouldn't sleep in his bed by himself, so I let him get in the twin bed with me. We slept that way until I was six years old.

Of course, my dad had to tell me that story. He said that he believed God had equipped me to be a leader of compassion and integrity even then. He knew I would pick a career field where I helped others. As I thought back on the old days when Chad and I used to play football in the yard, I took a healthy swig of my drink too. It had been a while since I didn't drink around Joyy. Being that I wasn't staying at home tonight, I knew I had time to sleep it off.

“Chad, you need to admit what's going on to yourself. You need to hear yourself verbalize your thoughts.”

He glanced at me. Thankfully, we were the only two here, because there was no way he would talk to me in front of our other brothers, especially Shy's ass. Chad was always hard in his presence, and I truly believed it was why Shy was so hard around everybody, at least until Brittany came along. After taking another healthy swig, he said, “Everybody is suspect, man. I don't know who that nigga could have recruited to carry out his agenda.”

“And you think that’s a healthy way to live? Shit, it ain’t living at all.”

“I fucking know that!” He lifted his hand, silently apologizing for yelling at me. “I don’t know how to stop worrying about it. Just when I think I’m cool, somebody at work stares at me too long. I’m telling you, I nearly jacked this nigga up at work today. My job gave me time off. They tried to give it to me when this shit was first uncovered, but I refused to take it. This time they forced me to take it. I had been talking to the psychiatrist at work, but that shit ain’t helping.”

“Do you want it to help? Do you want things to get better or do you think that you have to be on your toes every second of the day?”

He rolled his eyes. “Quit tryna counsel me, Zay.”

“Nigga, I just want to see you happy. I miss the Chad from six months ago. You ain’t ran with Alexz through the house in months. We all miss the playful Chad, the one we complain about and says gets on our last fucking nerve. This hostile, always got a chip on his shoulder nigga sitting here is a far cry from the Chad I know. You can get better. You just have to see the right people. So if you want to get better, then I can help you.”

He downed the rest of his drink, then turned to me and extended his hand. When I slapped it, he pulled me to him for a one-armed hug. “Let’s work on it,” he said.

I was glad he agreed to it. It had been an uphill battle trying to convince him that he needed help. However, I knew that the real battle hadn’t gotten here yet. Getting him to open up and express his true feelings was gonna be like pulling teeth. I was up for the challenge though, because we all needed our playful Chad back. The entire Berotte chemistry was off without him playing his part. It would be my mission though to get him back to himself, stronger and better than ever.



JUST WHEN I KICKED BACK, THINKING I HAD A FEW MINUTES to relax, Chanell knocked on the door. She'd missed her appointment last week, so I rescheduled her for today, hoping that she didn't cancel on me again. It took everything in me not to tell Dylan that I was counseling her at dinner yesterday. He probably wouldn't care, but I knew that besides it being illegal for me to do so, I should keep it to myself. The only person I told shit to was Shy and sometimes Dad. I knew they would keep it to themselves.

Now that I had accepted the job as the director, my schedule was free as hell. There wasn't nearly as much paperwork involved. The files for the people I was still counseling were maintained by my assistant. I only took notes during their sessions with me. Once I hired more counselors, J'Niya and Chanell would most likely be the only clients I counseled. My days would then be filled with meetings and researching different programs that would be beneficial here.

I sat up in my seat, and she said, "Hey, Mr. Berotte."

"Hey, Chanell. How are you?"

"I'm okay."

She sat in the chair in front of my desk and huffed. When she looked up at me, she smiled slightly. "I did it. I cursed his ass out for the filth he is, right in front of Mrs. Ramona. When I walked out of the house, she walked out right behind me. All that time she suspected he was cheating on her, but she never would have guessed it was me that he was taking advantage of. I wish I would have told her sooner."

"What's important is that you told her now."

"She moved in with me to help with Nixon and the bills. I'm just so grateful that Nixon wasn't his baby. Do you know how hard it would have been to raise him? I'm still going to have another DNA test done though to be sure. Nixon is dark complexioned. Luke is damn near white."

"I'm not supposed to tell you this, but I will in order to put your mind at ease. Luke's biological father is dark complexioned."

Her mouth slowly fell open and a smile spread on her lips. “So I can rest easy?”

“Yep.”

The tears fell from her eyes, so I stood and went sat next to her as I often did with my clients. As I rubbed her back, she looked over at me and said, “You were right. I feel like I’ve accomplished so much, made so much progress in my well-being by getting that out. Knowing that I have Mrs. Ramona’s support means everything to me. I didn’t need him.”

“I always tell my clients that the truth always stands on its own. It doesn’t need validation or explanations. Only lies need that. Standing in your truth can hurt, but in the long run, it’s so much better than living a life full of lies and secrets. Mrs. Ramona recognized the truth. So now your counseling will start from the beginning so we can purge your spirit. It’s going to be hard, but I know you can do it. I will be here for you after hours as much as I can.”

“Well, now that I have Mrs. Ramona, I should be fine after hours. Plus, Nixon usually keeps me busy. He’s a rambunctious little boy and gets his little butt into everything. Those couple of months that he lost in the womb means nothing, because he’s right on track,” she said as she rolled her eyes.

I chuckled. I couldn’t wait to start a family with Joyy. She was thirty-five and would be thirty-six this summer along with me. I supposed we had better get a move on. It was a conversation we needed to have about our timeline. We needed to discuss when she wanted to get married and when she wanted to have a baby. Hell, we were already practicing. I hadn’t used protection in a while, and I wasn’t pulling out. She didn’t seem to have any objections to it. So I supposed she was ready to get pregnant.

It was funny how history could repeat itself. That was how things started with us sixteen years ago. We used condoms, and then the shit got so good, they were quickly forgotten. That was what had happened this time. We got riled up and I didn’t want to stop to go get a condom. The counselor at the

health department wasn't practicing safe sex then or now. How ironic. She could be pregnant now and we just didn't know. We'd been raw fucking for over a month now. Only time would tell.

“Are you going to search for Luke to tell him?”

“I have started, but it's like he's a ghost. I can't find him.”

That was probably best. She had enough shit to deal with than to be dealing with a crack head too. I was hoping that Luke was still clean, but as with any addiction, that shit was hard to kick. He'd been missing in action for nearly three months. I remembered telling him that sometimes it was best to escape your familiar environment, but if he wanted to cop bad enough, he would find it anywhere, no matter where he relocated to.

“Maybe that's a good thing. When things happen that we can't explain, I'd like to think that it's for a reason unbeknownst to me to protect me. Maybe Luke isn't ready to receive what you have to tell him. His mind and other things may have to be prepared to accept the responsibility of raising a child.”

She slowly nodded. “How did you get so wise?”

“I can attribute that to my upbringing and life in general. I've made my mistakes and bad decisions. It's about learning from them and not repeating them. If a person continues to repeat bad behaviors, it definitely means that they didn't learn a thing the first time. Some of us have to hit rock bottom before we realize sh—I mean stuff have to change.”

She chuckled. “Okay. I'm ready.”

I nodded then stood to go back to my chair. Before I could walk away, she grabbed my hand, halting my progress. “Can you stay right here?”

I gave her tight smile and nodded. “Yeah. I can do that.”

Angling my chair where I could see her face and look into her eyes, I sat, and she began. She started from the very beginning, as far back as she could remember, and we were able to get to the day she left her mom to go live with Mrs.

Ramona and her husband before her time ran out. She took a deep breath and smiled at me. “You’re right. This is going to be hard, but I’m up for the challenge. My son deserves a better me.”

“You deserve a better you.”

“Thank you for snatching my ass out of that car that day. That was a huge wake up call for me. Your words penetrated my heart like you wouldn’t believe. You have a gift, Isaiah. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“Thank you, Chanell.”

She stood from her seat, and I walked her to the door, grateful that she was so receptive to my methods. The healing process had begun, and I could see the change in her already. The moment she left and I walked back into my office, my cell phone was ringing. When I saw Ms. India’s number, I quickly answered. “Hello?”

“Zay, J’Niya is in labor. We’re going to the hospital, and she wanted to be sure that I called you.”

“Okay. I’m about to leave work and meet y’all at St. Elizabeth. Or do you want me to come pick y’all up?”

“We’re already in the car. I’m backing out of the driveway now,” she said as I heard J’Niya groan.

“Okay. I’ll meet y’all at the hospital.”

I ended the call, not waiting for her response. I gathered my things, let Rozalyn know what was going on, and bolted out the door. On the drive, I called Joyy. I was excited, but I quickly dialed that back for a moment. J’Niya had said that she was giving the baby up. However, I often saw her talking to her belly. One time I’d even caught her reading to the baby. She’d bonded with the child moving around in there.

“Hey, baby! I’m on my way.”

“Okay. Be careful, and I’ll see you when I get there. I’m on my way too.”

“Okay.”

Joyy's job was closer to the hospital than mine, so I knew she would beat me there. I didn't know what to expect. My ultimate concern was for J'Niya. I quickly made a call to Alexz to let her know that she was in labor, and she said she would tell everyone else. I didn't want them all to show up now and overwhelm J'Niya, but I knew they would all come when they got off work anyway. Hopefully, she didn't have a long painful labor.

When I turned in the parking lot in front of the hospital, I went straight to the valet booth. I didn't have time to be looking for a spot. Joyy was standing there waiting for me. Once I got to her, I grabbed her hand and practically pulled her inside to the elevator. I had to constantly remind myself that my strides were a lot longer than hers.

The wait wasn't long. Only a couple of seconds. We got on the elevator to head to the third floor. I took the time to pull Joyy to me and kiss her lips. "Hey, baby."

"Hey, Zay."

After gently rubbing her cheek, the elevator dinged, signaling we'd arrived on the third floor. When the doors opened, we quickly exited to see where J'Niya had been taken. As we were getting to the nurse's station, we saw them wheeling her to a room. It looked like an examination room. "Hey, Ms. India. What's going on?"

"Hey, Zay. Hey, Joyy. They have to check to see how far she's dilated. If she hasn't reached four centimeters, they may send her back home. Her water hadn't broken yet, but she has had her bloody show."

I nodded, although I didn't know what she was talking about. I went inside just to let J'Niya know I was there. She smiled then winced immediately after. She was probably having a contraction. I stepped in the hallway while they did their thing, hoping that she would be okay, but still nervously pacing waiting for word. After a few minutes, Joyy came out and said, "She's six centimeters, so she will definitely be admitted. They are about to get her situated into a room."

I nodded, then pulled her in my arms. She laid her head on my chest, and I could tell that she was a little troubled. “It’s okay, baby. J’Niya will be fine and so will the baby. We just have to be prepared to let the baby go.”

“I know. That’s the hardest part. I know that it may be easier for J’Niya though. If that baby looks like that fool, it will be even easier.”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t want to give Joyy false hope by telling her what I suspected, so I remained quiet about it. I kissed her forehead, and we waited for them to move J’Niya. “How do you feel about having a baby... getting married?”

“I want both of those things with you, Zay.”

“Well, I know that, but how soon?”

“I think we’ve already started on the baby part.”

She giggled, and I couldn’t help but laugh too. That was my exact thought from earlier. “True. Very true. What about marriage?”

“What will be different?”

“You’ll be Joyy Berotte instead of Joyy Roberts should you choose to take my name.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Some women prefer to keep their maiden name. I didn’t want to insinuate that I expected you to take my name.”

“I am going to take your name with pride. I waited a long time for it. Is that all that will change though?”

“I mean, yeah.”

“Then we can get married whenever you’re ready. I’m ready. There’s no need for anything fancy like Alexz had. It’s just me, my mom, and Seneca. Of course, Kaysyn and her family, but she’s a part of your family too, thanks to Axton. But we have to wait until after Shy and Brittany. They’re getting married in July.”

“Mm. When did she decide?”

“I don’t know exactly when, but she told us this past weekend at the house.”

“I’m surprised Shy hadn’t said anything yet.”

“She probably just told him Sunday evening after we all left your parents’ house. You know Brittany doesn’t like a lot of attention on her.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Since we’re going to wait, you want a fall wedding?”

“I just want to be married to you. I don’t care when.”

I smiled slightly and held her tighter as the door opened. They had J’Niya in a wheelchair, and they were moving pretty quickly.

“Her water broke while we were getting her situated. This baby said it’s coming now,” Ms. India said.

I chuckled, and we followed them to see what room she was going to. Once they wheeled her inside, I said to Joyy, “September sounds good to me, but I guess I need to make it official and put a ring on your finger.”

“I mean, that’s what the future groom normally does.”

I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out the ring I’d been carrying around with me for a week now, waiting for the perfect time. This wasn’t traditional, but it would mean the same thing. I grabbed her hand and slid the ring on her finger. “Official.”

She stared at the ring with her mouth open as I chuckled silently. “Zay... really?”

When she stared up at me, I said, “I knew I wanted this with you before you came back to me. I was just waiting for you to know that you wanted it too. This moment was beyond inevitable. We both knew it was coming. Now get ready to join the family as Joyy Michelle Berotte.”

“I been ready.”

J’Niya’s scream broke us out of our bubble. We both looked toward the room as one of the nurses exited. “If y’all want to see her before we get started, now is the time. She is progressing quickly, which is good for her.”

We nodded and Joyy looked back at me while biting her bottom lip. I knew that I was in trouble tonight, and I couldn’t wait. Since J’Niya and Ms. India had been there, we’d been having quiet sex. That wouldn’t be the case tonight, because I knew Ms. India would be staying here. She puckered her lips, and I lowered my face to hers and kissed her softly, sucking her bottom lip. “Mm. I can’t wait to celebrate.”

“Shit, me either. But for now, let’s go welcome this baby into the world and see what the future holds for J’Niya.”

I grabbed my fiancée’s hand, and we walked into the room, ready to be supportive, no matter what decision J’Niya chose to make. Love would be at the forefront in each scenario, and that was what was important.

EPILOGUE



Joyy
One month later...

“I CAN’T HELP IT YO’ GIRL KNOW GOOD DICK WHEN SHE FEEL it.”

“Senecal, get out of my face. I can’t deal with you right now. I have way too much to do.”

He rolled his eyes. Calling him that always got him to leave me alone. He was on my last damn nerve. Kaysyn was still fucking around with his ass. The only thing I was happy about was that she and Luckey had amicably decided to go their separate ways for a while. They didn’t file for divorce though. I suppose they wanted to see if absence would make the heart grow fonder... or in their case, soften it. I told her she needed to quit fucking around with Seneca’s ass. If nothing else made me want to drink, it was that shit. I wanted what was best for my girl, and I didn’t feel like Seneca was it.

When I heard the baby’s cries, I made my way to the guest room to see J’Niya changing her pamper. Watching her take care of her mini-me made me emotional every time. She chose to keep her. After she delivered her and heard her cries, she started crying too. When my mama assured her that it was okay to change her mind, she did so without a second thought. Seeing her burst into tears when they gave her little Miss Katera had my mama and me in tears as well.

She started to sing to her, so I let them be. I was just as attached to that baby as she was. I had been begging my mama to move back to Beaumont. Summer was approaching, so it was the perfect time. However, she didn't want to have to change schools again. She said she would think about it after J'Niya's senior year. Until then, it seemed I would be visiting every other weekend just to see the baby.

We were giving her a baby shower today. Since she decided to keep the baby, she didn't have anything. Isaiah had bought a bassinet for the baby and a car seat. I'd gotten some clothes, diapers, and other necessities. Everyone else would be gifting her today. As I headed back to the kitchen, I saw Alexz in their sampling the meatballs.

“Umm... woman! Get out of that food.”

She jumped, showing that I'd frightened her, then said, “Girl, I'm starving! This baby ain't playing with my ass. I'm always hungry.”

She wasn't lying about that. She'd already gained nearly fifteen pounds. It seemed half the weight had gone to her face and breasts. Last week, she found out that she was having a girl. Isaiah came inside to see Alexz wiping her mouth. “What are you eating now? I just gave you a sausage from the pit.”

My eyebrows shot up as I stared at her. She giggled and said, “Don't judge me, Joyy. Judge, Ms. India.”

I couldn't help but laugh at her crazy ass. She walked to the cooler and got herself a Sprite and headed back outside as Zay wrapped his arms around me. The barbecue scent was pinch hitting as his cologne for the day. I kissed his smoke scented lips and didn't want to stop. When he tried to pull away, I stuck my tongue out and licked them. “See, you tryna get fucked with all these people here.”

“They're family. They can entertain themselves.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “You know, I didn't think it was possible for you to get any nastier than you already were, but I was clearly wrong. When you pulled me in a storage closet at church, I knew you had breached the

threshold of hell. Thankfully, I have morals and didn't want to defile God's house. The minute I marry you though, it'll be open season. Marriage is holy in His eyes."

"Oh, so then you'll handle me at church without feeling guilty? Is that what you're saying?"

"Married people having sex is worshipping God, girl. Read your bible. After we're married, I can take you on top of the communion table."

I nearly got choked. Zay was an entire fool. It seemed we'd fallen into this relationship with ease and had become the most comfortable around one another we'd ever been. As I laughed, I could feel it. I ran to the bathroom and regurgitated my insides. There was nothing but water and a granola bar in there, because I was waiting to enjoy the food at the festivities. After cleaning myself up, I opened the door to find Zay standing there, a concerned look on his face.

"Everything okay, baby?"

"Yeah. I guess me getting choked and laughing at the same time provoked it."

He frowned slightly. "If you say so. I need to go check the meat on the pit. You sure you okay?"

I smiled slightly, deciding I would put him out of his misery. "I'm pregnant, baby."

He stood still as a statue just staring at me, then suddenly scooped me up and spun around in a circle. I laughed then quickly said, "You might wanna put me down before I throw up again."

He set me on my feet and went to his knees. When he placed his large hands on my belly, he said, "I love you already, munchkin."

The tears fell from my eyes when he stood and kissed my lips. I couldn't let him go though. The good thing was that he wasn't trying to get away. His hands journeyed to my ass, and he picked me up, propping me against the wall. Breaking our kiss, I panted as he kissed my neck.

“Zay... Oh God... Zay not here.”

“No wonder your ass been so damn horny and wet. Let me get a sample of this pregnant pussy, girl.”

He gripped me as he pulled me from the wall in the hallway inside the bathroom. Once he set me on the vanity, he turned to lock the door. I stood and pulled up my sundress, waiting for him to take me to my good time. When he made his way back to me, he unzipped his jean shorts and let them fall to the floor.

“There you go not wearing underwear again. What I told you about that shit?”

He pushed inside of me, and I soaked him. My pussy had been on one for the past month. “Mm. You gon’ handle me, Daddy?”

He didn’t respond as he lifted my legs, causing me to fall back into the wall. He didn’t leave me there though. After putting my legs on his shoulders, he pulled me forward and dug heaven and hell out of me. By the time he nudded, we were both sweating and panting, not to mention how sticky we were down below. When he withdrew from me, there was a knock on the door.

“I knew y’all nasty asses were in there. Fuck what we supposed to eat. Just let the meat burn the fuck up.”

I stifled a giggle as I recognized Chad’s voice. “Man, get the meat off the pit.”

“I already did. No thank you necessary, Funk Master Flex. Make sure you take a shower.”

I couldn’t hold in my laughter at that point. Zay slowly shook his head as he smiled at me.

“See what you do to me? Got me losing all my focus. Your love makes me lose all my sense, girl. And now you blessing me with a baby? I love you.”

“I love you too, Zay.”

Love couldn’t be more perfect. Isaiah Dashawn Berotte was the man that held my heart, and now he carried my soul

within his. The way he completely consumed me had to be ordained by God himself. I was happy mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. My life was complete, and it was thanks to him I could healthily live it to the fullest in every aspect.

The End

If you did not read the author's note at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. 😊

AFTERWORD

From the Author...

What can I say about this story? Isaiah was so damn perfect. I loved every inch... I mean every moment of him. LOL! His words were really taking me there. As I read through the story, I was like, *damn Zay*. If only every man were like him. I was waiting for him to mess up, and that never happened.

Joyy was a little complicated. Isaiah's absence really did a number on her, and apparently, so did her dad's. I was happy that she started thriving in counseling and in her AA meetings. When I started this story, I didn't know how it would turn out with her alcoholism and all. Thankfully, it worked out for the best, because I don't wanna deal with y'all's shenanigans. LOL!

This whole Seneca/Lexi/Kaysyn foolishness is on my last nerve, and I don't even know where the shit came from. Ugh! Seneca is a whole shitload of trouble, and I don't know if I wanna see him again after this. I believe that he's done with trying to mess with Lexi, but Kaysyn? I didn't foresee that at all!

I was grateful that J'Niya's story worked out for the best. The fact that she was related to Joyy was interesting as well. Isaiah reporting them anonymously was a stretch for him. He wasn't a rule breaker, but that issue was driving him insane.

How surprised were you with seeing Isaiah counsel Chanell? I thought some drama would come of that too, but as of right now, all is well.

I suppose you know whose story is definitely coming next. Chad is the last biological Berotte. From him will come DJ and Jamel's stories. I also plan to do a few spin-offs, starting with Arrow Vaughn, Axton's brother.

I really hope you enjoyed this story. As always, I gave it my all. Whether you liked it or not, please take the time to leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book, under the same title that includes some great R&B and rap tracks to tickle your fancy.

Please keep up with me on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (@authormonicawalters), Twitter (@monlwalters), and Clubhouse (@monicawalters). You can also visit my Amazon author page at www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters to view my releases.

Please subscribe to my webpage for updates and sneak peeks of upcoming releases! <https://authormonicawalters.com>.

For live discussions, giveaways, and inside information on upcoming releases, join my Facebook group, Monica's Romantic Sweet Spot at <https://bit.ly/2P2106X>.



ALSO BY MONICA WALTERS

Other Titles by Monica Walters

Standalones

Love Like a Nightmare

Forbidden Fruit (An Erotic Novella)

Say He's the One

Only If You Let Me

On My Way to You (An Urban Romance)

Any and Everything for Love

Savage Heart (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Shawty You for Me by T. Key)

I'm In Love with a Savage (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Trade It All by T. Key)

Don't Tell Me No (An Erotic Novella)

To Say, I Love You: A Short Story Anthology with the Authors of BLP

Drive Me to Ecstasy

Whatever It Takes: An Erotic Novella

When You Touch Me

When's the Last Time?

Best You Ever Had

Deep As It Goes (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Perfect Timing by T. Key)

The Shorts: A BLP Anthology with the Authors of BLP (Made to Love You-Collab with Kay Shanee)

All I Need is You (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Divine Love by T. Key)

This Love Hit Different (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Something New by T. Key)

Until I Met You

Marry Me Twice

Last First Kiss

Nobody Else Gon' Get My Love (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Better Than Before by T. Key)

Love Long Overdue (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Distant Lover by T. Key)

Next Lifetime

Fall Knee-Deep In It

Unwrapping Your Love: The Gift

Who Can I Run To

You're Always on My Mind

Stuck On You (available for preorder)

Full Figured 18 with La Jill Hunt (available for preorder)

Behind Closed Doors Series

Be Careful What You Wish For
You Just Might Get It
Show Me You Still Want It

Sweet Series

Bitter Sweet
Sweet and Sour
Sweeter Than Before
Sweet Revenge
Sweet Surrender
Sweet Temptation
Sweet Misery
Sweet Exhale

Never Enough (A Sweet Series Update)

Sweet Series: Next Generation

Can't Run From Love
Access Denied: Luxury Love
Still: Your Best

Sweet Series: Kai's Reemergence

Beautiful Mistake
Favorite Mistake

Motives and Betrayal Series

Ulterior Motives
Ultimate Betrayal
Ultimatum: #lovemeorleaveme, Part 1
Ultimatum: #lovemeorleaveme, Part 2

Written Between the Pages Series

The Devil Goes to Church Too
The Book of Noah (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with The Flow of Jah's Heart by
T. Key)
The Revelations of Ryan, Jr. (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with All That Jazz by T.
Key)

The Country Hood Love Stories

8 Seconds to Love
Breaking Barriers to Your Heart
Training My Heart to Love You

The Country Hood Love Stories: The Hendersons

Blindsided by Love

Ignite My Soul
Come and Get Me
In Way Too Deep
You Belong to Me
Found Love in a Rider
Damaged Intentions: The Soul of a Thug
Let Me Ride
Better the Second Time Around
I Wish I Could Be The One
I Wish I Could Be The One 2
Put That on Everything: A Henderson Family Novella
What's It Gonna Be?

The Hendersons: The Next Generation

Someone Like You

The Berotte Family Series

Love On Replay
Deeper Than Love
Something You Won't Forget
I'm The Remedy